The clarity of the majority’s preference moderates the influence of lobbying on representation

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Abstract
Delegate conceptions of representation require activities of legislators to reflect their constituents’ preferences. Recent research has examined the distortionary effects of lobbying activities on this representational linkage. Here, I argue that the effect of interest groups on legislators’ behavior depends on the clarity of the majority’s preferences in a district. When the electorate is narrowly divided, Members of Parliament (MPs) may choose to reap the benefits associated with interest groups as costs from defection are lowest. The results show that MP defection from constituents’ preferences is only positively associated with sectional interest group ties when the constituency is narrowly divided on an issue. Likewise, MP defection is only negatively associated with MP’s ties to cause groups when the constituency is narrowly divided on an issue. These results are important because they specify the conditions under which interest group lobbying is sufficient to override constituents’ preferences.

Keywords
interest groups, lobbying, representation

A crucial aspect in the chain of democratic responsiveness is that the representatives’ activity should reflect their constituents’ preferences (Pitkin, 1967; Powell, 2004, among others). Although an idealized vision of democracy might suggest that the link between voters and representatives should be straightforward, there are strong reasons to believe that this is not always the case. In two recent articles of the greatest theoretical importance, Portmann et al. (2012) and Giger and Klüver (2016) provide a rather pessimistic view of the linkage between voters and representatives. Both suggest that the connection is distorted by the lobbying activities of interest groups.

Both groups of authors empirically show that interest groups indeed appear to exert strong influence on legislators’ behavior in Parliament. First, Portmann et al. (2012) (henceforth, PSE) showed that those Members of Parliament (MPs) who have more ties with interest groups are more likely to vote against their constituents. Building upon this work, Giger and Klüver (2016) (henceforth, GK) divide interest groups depending on the nature of their aims and report that those MPs who have strong ties with “sectional” groups, groups that represent specific segments of a society and pursue private interests, such as farmers or business organizations are more likely to defect from the preferences of their voters. By contrast, legislators who have strong ties with “cause” groups, those that pursue a common good such as human rights or a clean environment, are more likely to vote with the preference of the majority of their constituents. This finding regarding sectional group influence is troubling for the notion of representational democracy in the presence of lobbying, and it becomes even more disturbing in the light of authors’ data showing the frequent disagreement between voters and interest groups on most referendums in Switzerland throughout the period of study: 1996, 2006, and 2009.1

This research complements these striking findings by bringing the clarity of citizens’ preferences into the analysis.2 I argue that the clarity of the majority’s preferences, or constituents’ ideological heterogeneity, is a mechanism to balance the (often) competing interests between voters and
interest groups. Specifically, MPs respond to both voters and interest groups, but the influence of interest groups is conditional on the divisiveness of the electorate on a policy issue. When citizens are narrowly divided on an issue, the electoral impact from defection—the difference between the number of voters who will reward or punish the legislator for her behavior—is smaller, which allows interest groups to exert a greater influence on legislators’ behavior. By contrast, when citizens are clearly favoring one side of a policy, legislators’ reward (or punishment) as a result of following the majority (minority) is larger, which decreases the influence of interest groups on legislators’ behavior. It is also possible that when the electorate in a district is narrowly divided on an issue, MPs are more likely to err when estimating the preferences of the median voter among their constituents. Using a data set that includes individual-level results of 20,260 legislative votes cast in the Swiss Parliament by 488 MPs on 118 policy proposals subject to parliamentary approval in the period 1996–2009 and referendum outcome, I find empirical evidence for these propositions.

This research contributes to a long line of political science research that examines the relationship between heterogeneous constituencies and elite-mass congruence by suggesting that the opportunities for rent extraction might be an explanation for the widespread finding that legislators from more homogeneous states are more responsive to their constituents (e.g., Bishin et al., 2006; Gerber and Lewis, 2004; Gulati, 2004). Hence, constituents’ heterogeneity in policy preferences crucially affects the capacity of interest groups to influence the behavior of legislators and, thus, affecting the congruence between legislators and their constituents.

In what follows, I first illustrate the mechanics of the argument by developing a simple decision model of any given legislator. The model elucidates the differences between the currently dominant theory on the influence of lobbying on legislative behavior, and the impact of lobbying on representation that considers the clarity of citizens’ demands. Second, I discuss the data and methods most appropriate for testing the distinct empirical implications from both theories. Third, I subject those data to an empirical examination. Finally, I conclude the research note by arguing that breakdowns in the representation of constituents’ interests occurs in only very limited circumstances.

Two theories of representation in the presence of lobbying

Much of the recent literature trying to empirically gauge the impact of lobbying on representation has ignored the strength of the clarity of constituents’ preferences. In the theoretical framework of both PSE and, especially, GK, MPs associated with sectional (cause) interest groups are always more (less) likely to defect from their voters. In other words, according to GK, the ties with interest groups influence defection irrespective of the number of citizens on each side of the policy question. To clarify the basic components, the following utility equation illustrates their theory of representation in the presence of lobbying: the constant-effect hypothesis (PSE, 2012; GK, 2016).

Let \( l \) be a legislator who decides whether to defect from his or her citizens or to represent them by voting in favor of their interests. A legislator \( u_l \) maximizes the following utility equation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{\text{(defection)}} = & -B + I_c, \\
\text{\text{(congruence)}} = & B + I_c,
\end{align*}
\]

where \( B \) refers to the size of the electoral impact that the roll-call vote will have on legislator \( l \), which is non-negative: \( B \geq 0 \); \( I_c \) denotes the sum of contributions that sectional interest groups provide to legislator \( l \) in exchange of defecting from his or her constituents, which is non-negative \( I_c \geq 0 \); and \( I_s \) denotes the sum of contributions that cause interest groups provide to legislator \( l \) in exchange of not defecting from his or her constituents, which is non-negative \( I_s \geq 0 \). In words (a) the utility of defecting is equivalent to the rents extracted from the interest groups minus the electoral punishment and (b) the utility from congruence is the electoral reward from congruence plus the benefit obtained from supporting the policy that favors cause interest groups. Consequently, a legislator \( l \) will defect only if: \( I_s > 2B + I_c \).

In the light of the above utility function, PSE’s and GK’s theoretical models implicitly assume that legislators’ decisions to defect entirely depend on \( B, I_c \), and \( I_s \). On the one hand, as the size of the expected contribution from sectional interest groups due to defection, \( I_c \), increases, defection becomes more likely. Similarly, as the size of the expected contribution from cause groups due to congruence, \( I_s \), increases, defection becomes less likely. GK use the number of each type of interest groups associated with the legislator to operationalize the size of the expected contribution from interest groups.

On the other hand, the likelihood of defection increases as the electoral reward/punishment, \( B \), from congruence/defection increases. Yet, the existence and relevance of \( B \) remains underdeveloped in the dominant model of representation in the presence of lobbying. The above theoretical approach assumes that once a legislator has voted with the expected median voter—the expected majority’s preference—the legislator obtains a fixed reward \( B \). This constitutes the constant-effect hypothesis:

\( \text{H1 (constant effect): An MPs ties with sectional (cause) interest groups is positively (negatively) associated with defection irrespective of the size of the majority.} \)
An alternative perspective would suggest that voters do not reward or punish legislators with respect to their congruence with the entire district but with respect to their own interests. If we understand that voters electorally reward legislators who favor their interests but punish legislators who do not favor their interests, then the clarity of the majority’s preferences should be a crucial determinant in legislators’ defection. Clearly, this should condition the influence of interest groups. A more complete theory of representation in the presence of lobbying should consider the size of the majority group because its size is proportional to the magnitude of both the electoral reward from congruence and the electoral punishment from defecting.

To consider this more completely, I bring in the clarity of citizens’ preferences on a policy issue into the analysis. This sheds light on the fundamental role of voters in determining when the role of interest groups is influential in the legislators’ decisions. When citizens are narrowly divided on an issue, the electoral reward or punishment from congruence or defection is smaller, which allows interest groups to exert a greater influence on legislators’ behavior.

By contrast, when citizens clearly favor a policy outcome over another, a legislators’ reward (or punishment) as a result of following the majority (minority) is larger, decreasing the influence of interest groups.

To clarify the argument, I expand the above utility function by reflecting this alternative theory of representation in the presence of lobbying. Thus, let \( l \) be a legislator who decides whether to defect from his or her constituents or to represent them by voting in favor of their interests. In the decreasing-effect hypothesis, a legislator \( l \) maximizes the following utility equation:

\[
 u_l \text{ (defection)} = -B E(c) + I, \\
 u_l \text{ (congruence)} = B E(c) + I_c, 
\]

where \( E(c) = E(\pi_w - (1 - \pi_m)) \), \( \pi_m \) denotes the relative size of the majority, which ranges between 0 and 1: \( \pi_m \in (0,1) \); and, thus, \( E(c) \) indicates the expected difference between the majority and the minority—the clarity of the majority’s preference—which ranges between 0 and 1: \( c \in (0,1) \). The solution to the new utility function is that legislator \( l \) will defect only if \( I > 2Bc + I_c \). Otherwise, she will vote congruently with her constituents’ preferences.

The theoretical contribution of this new setting lies on the conditional nature of \( B \). \( Bc \) captures the idea that a legislator’s electoral rewards (if negative, electoral punishment) for voting in favor of (if negative, against) the majority of the citizens in his or her district is expected to be proportional to the share of voters who voted the same as the legislator \( l \). Similarly, as \( E(c) \), the expected relative size of the majority in a district, becomes smaller, legislator \( l \) becomes more uncertain whether she will vote congruently in each policy with the median voter of her district or not.

In the extreme case in which the electorate is totally divided, \( E(c) = 0 \), the solution to the inequality becomes \( I > I_c \). In this situation, lobbying activities entirely dominate MPs’ legislative behavior.

Hence, the electoral reward/punishment from defection becomes larger as the clarity of the majority’s preference, and so the clarity of the signal about what the citizens want, increases as legislators should be less influenced by the preferences of interest groups. In the case of sectional groups, the positive association between interest group ties with defection is expected to become weaker as the majority’s preference becomes clarified—the impact of \( I_c \) on defection decreases as \( E(c) \) increases because this means that the costs of punishment from voting against MPs constituents increases.

In the case of cause groups, the expected effect is opposite because a clear majority’s preference simply adds greater incentives for not defecting from the electorate. Thus, the role of the clarity of the constituents’ preferences is expected to reinforce the effect of cause groups. Therefore, the clarity of the majority’s preference should make legislators even less likely to defect from their constituents. The two forces—the effect of the majority’s preference and cause groups—move in the same direction and, thus, we should expect reinforcement effects. Yet, their reinforcing effects should be weaker because the reinforcement process may be empirically unobserved in many situations because they may be empirically equivalent. In short, the reward from voting in favor of many constituents or cause groups may be sufficient to discourage defection if either the majority clearly favors one side of the policy issue or the contributions from cause groups are sufficiently large. This leads to an alternative hypothesis:

H2 (decreasing effect): the association of MPs ties with interest groups with defection becomes stronger as the clarity of the majority’s preference decreases.

Research design

This section lays out how the hypotheses are tested empirically. I first describe some key institutional features of the Swiss political context and the dataset that allows me to test the theories. Then, I discuss the measures of the dependent, independent, and control variables. Finally, I discuss the estimation strategy.

The Swiss context

The Swiss context provides an ideal setting to test theories of representation. The Federal Assembly is bicameral, being composed of the 200-seat National Council—the lower chamber—and the 46-seat Council of States—the upper chamber. The members of the National Council (Nationalrat or Conseil National) are elected for 4 years...
in a system of proportional representation. The 26 electoral districts correspond to the 26 cantons of the federation, and their magnitude varies as a function of the number of voters in each district, with a minimum of one seat per district. The largest districts are Zurich and Bern with 35 and 25 seats, respectively, and 6 districts have a single member.

Just like most democracies around the world, Swiss MPs vote for the creation and modification of laws and constitutional amendments. When making their roll-call votes in parliament, MPs do not have exact knowledge of constituent preferences. The unique feature of the Swiss system is the importance of the popular vote. Switzerland combines their representative democracy with features of direct democracy by which legislative activity is directly subject to approval by citizens via three types of popular votes: mandatory referendums, constitutional amendments or adhesion to supranational communities require a referendum; facultative referendums, laws are subject to referendum if 50,000 citizens demand it; and, finally, popular initiatives, 100,000 citizens may demand for a constitutional change, which will be discussed in the Parliament and voted in a referendum.6

Due to the Swiss institutional configuration, referendums regularly reveal the preferences of constituents, which can then be used to match the revealed preferences of constituents with what the MPs voted in the Parliament on the exact same bill. The simultaneous use of parliamentarian procedures and direct democracy over identical policies provides a setting for researchers to locate MPs’ and citizens’ preferences on the same scale. Along with prior studies in Switzerland and elsewhere, I exploit the match between the roll-call votes and the popular votes to directly associate the revealed preferences of the constituents with the actions of their representatives.

Data

In order to test the hypotheses, I use the legislative voting and interest groups data from the Swiss Lower House used by GK (2016). This data set builds on the work by Portmann et al. (2012) and Stadelmann et al. (2013, 2015), which has become one of the most prominent data contributions to the literature of representation in the last years. Specifically, the data set includes individual-level results of 20,260 legislative votes cast in the Swiss Parliament by 488 MPs on 118 policy proposals subject to parliamentary approval in the period 1996–2009. To assess the defection of MPs, the data set combines from roll-call votes in the Parliament with the results of the popular vote in each MPs’ electoral district on the same policy issues. The advantage of the setting is that, as in countries without referendums, Swiss politicians do not have exact knowledge of constituent preferences when making decisions in parliament, which makes the results particularly credible and generalizable.

Measures

For the empirical analyses, the dependent variable is deflection, an indicator that equals one when a member of a parliament does not vote the same way as the majority of his or her district. The main independent variables are the number of sectional groups and the number of cause groups associated with the MP. A unique institutional feature of the Swiss system is that all MPs are required to report all interest groups to which they belong to, which are then published in an annual interest groups registry.7 These variables capture the number of interest groups that MPs indicated in the parliamentarian registry in the year of the referendum.8 The conditional variable of interest, E(c), is captured by the ultimate margin of victory of the referendum. The margin of victory is measured as the percentage vote of the winning outcome – 50.

To clarify the distinct assumption made in prior work using this data set and the assumption made here, it should be noticed that a crucial aspect in the data set is the sequence of events in the revelation of preferences between legislators and citizens. The assessment of MP defection is based on the roll-call votes by the MPs in the Parliament on the policy, which takes place prior to the referendum where the constituents’ preferences are revealed. If the MP does not vote the same as the median voter subsequently votes in her district, this is coded as defection. Yet, legislators cast their votes before the revelation of constituents’ preferences through the referendum ever takes place.

Thus, to interpret any disjuncture between constituents and MPs as “defection,” the analyses based on the constant-effect hypothesis have assumed that MPs can perfectly predict the outcome of the referendums with certainty. In fact, PSE and GK are aware of this and explicitly argue that MPs are quite knowledgeable of the opinion of their constituents through public debates and opinion polls. The analysis of the decreasing-effect hypothesis relaxes this assumption. Specifically, the decreasing theory admits that all that an MP may know about a referendum that is ultimately decided by a narrow (lopsided) margin of victory is that her voters are (not) divided on that issue. Note that the task of forecasting the outcomes of referendums is particularly daunting given that the outcome, the constituency referendum outcome, is measured at the level of the electoral district (the canton), where the informational environment is probably rather sparse. Therefore, the assumption made by the decreasing hypothesis is more realistic, considering what legislators may not know about a closely contested referendum before it ever takes place.

As with previous studies, the models include controls for the number of months until next election, the number of MPs per canton, whether the MP votes with his or her party,
the margin of victory in the parliamentarian roll-call vote, the salience of the vote, and two dummies that indicate the type of the referendum, whether it was obligatory, facultative, or the result of a popular initiative (category of reference).

Estimation strategy

The aim of the empirical section is to measure the effect of sectional and cause interest groups on defection at different values of the clarity of the majority’s preferences. To do so, I begin by estimating a mixed effects logistic regression with random intercepts by party and canton in which the margin of victory in the canton of the MP is interacted with the number of sectional interest groups at the MP level. Although the mixed effects model provides efficient estimates, their consistency hinged on the exogeneity assumption; that is, the assumption that the residuals are independent of the covariates. Because this might not hold, I further test the robustness of the main specification by adding referendum, party, and canton fixed effects. All variance at the level of the referendum, party, and canton are controlled out with this set of fixed effects, and, consequently, it minimizes the potential for omitted variable bias. In addition, I compute cluster-robust standard errors at the level of the MP to correct the correlation of observations for the same MP across different referendum.

Results

To test whether margin of victory of the referendum moderates the effect of interest groups on defection, I show the

<p>| Table 1. The effect of lobbying on MP defection conditional on the margin of victory of the referendums. |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dependent variable: defection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sectional groups</td>
<td>0.013*** (0.005)</td>
<td>0.086*** (0.009)</td>
<td>0.085*** (0.009)</td>
<td>0.093*** (0.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cause groups</td>
<td>-0.035*** (0.008)</td>
<td>-0.043*** (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.043*** (0.015)</td>
<td>-0.044*** (0.024)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margin of victory</td>
<td>-0.034*** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.023*** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.023*** (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.074*** (0.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of sectional groups × margin of victory</td>
<td>-0.006*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.006*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.007*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.007*** (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cause groups × margin of victory</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP-party-level controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official party position congruence</td>
<td>-0.551*** (0.049)</td>
<td>-0.546*** (0.049)</td>
<td>-0.568*** (0.050)</td>
<td>-0.684*** (0.059)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum-level controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness of parliament decision</td>
<td>0.043*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.044*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.044*** (0.002)</td>
<td>0.044*** (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salience</td>
<td>-0.003† (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.003† (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.003† (0.002)</td>
<td>-0.003† (0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of months until next election</td>
<td>-0.003*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.003*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.003*** (0.001)</td>
<td>-0.003*** (0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum obligatory</td>
<td>-0.423*** (0.049)</td>
<td>-0.436*** (0.049)</td>
<td>-0.436*** (0.049)</td>
<td>-0.436*** (0.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum facultative</td>
<td>-0.511*** (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.512*** (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.513*** (0.040)</td>
<td>-0.513*** (0.040)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton-level controls</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of MPs in district</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.004)</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.004)</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.004)</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party RE/FE</td>
<td>RE</td>
<td>RE</td>
<td>FE</td>
<td>FE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canton FE/RE</td>
<td>RE</td>
<td>RE</td>
<td>FE</td>
<td>FE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referendum FE/RE</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>FE</td>
<td>FE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>20,260</td>
<td>20,260</td>
<td>20,260</td>
<td>20,260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-11.593</td>
<td>-11.541</td>
<td>-11.480</td>
<td>-10.729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>23,212</td>
<td>23,113</td>
<td>23,074</td>
<td>21,789</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Constants are omitted from the output. Models 1—4 report standard errors in parenthesis and Model 5 adjusts the standard errors and reports robust-clustered standard errors at the level of the MP in parenthesis. Referendum-level controls and canton-level controls are excluded models that include referendum and canton fixed effects, respectively.

*p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.
main-effect model, but I then interact the main effects with the margin of victory of the referendum. Model 1 in Table 1 presents the main effects of interest group ties. It shows the effect of the number of sectional and cause groups associated with the MP on defecting from their electorate. Model 2 complements the main effects by adding an interaction term of the number of interest groups with margin of victory of the referendum—or the clarity of the signal from the constituents on what position they want the MP to take on the issue.

The first element to consider from the results is that the added interaction in the models significantly improves their goodness of fit \( \chi^2(2) = 102.8, \ p \text{ value} < 0.001 \). This can be seen in the results of the likelihood ratio test, which shows that the addition of the interactive terms significantly improves the fit of the models over the null model treating the effects of interest groups on defection as constant across all referendums margins of victory.

From the regression results in Table 1, there is sufficient evidence to reject hypothesis 1, the constant-effect hypothesis, which conjectured a constant effect of ties with interest groups on defection along the margin of victory of the referendums. Instead, sectional group ties increase the probability that MPs defect from their voters but only when the electorate is narrowly divided. The main effect of the number of sectional groups from models 2–4 indicate that when the margin of victory is 0, in the extreme case when the referendum outcome is ultimately 50/50, then the effect of lobbying on the MP voting against their constituents is statistically significant in the expected direction at a 99\% confidence level. In addition, we also see that the interaction term takes a positive value. This indicates that as referendums become more lopsided, the effect of lobbying dissipates.

Consistent with hypothesis 2, the decreasing-effect hypothesis, MPs are more likely to “defect” from a majority of voters when the electorate is narrowly divided or the outcome of the subsequent referendums may appear uncertain. Either MPs misjudge where the median voter on the topic stands or they reason that their roll-call vote will only alienate an acceptably small number of voters. By contrast, MPs become less likely to defect from their voters as the referendum becomes more lopsided or, in other words, when the clarity of the signal on what the electorate wants becomes more unequivocal toward a specific position on the issue. In these instances, MPs are less likely to err in estimating the district median voter and she is unwilling to risk alienating such a large group.

To illustrate the conditional effects of interest group ties, Figure 1 reports the marginal effects of the number of sectional groups tied to an MP on the MP’s defection from his or her electorate at different values of margin of victory of the referendum. Panel (a) in Figure 1 shows that the most striking finding from GK’s original research piece, the positive association between MP’s ties with sectional groups and MP’s defection, is statistically significant in the expected direction for referendums with a margin of victory of 63.1\%/36.9\% or less. Referendums with margins of victory this narrow constitute 37.9\% of the observations (those observations with an estimated effect above the dashed line in Figure 1, Panel (a)). Even for the referendums for which the association is positive, the effect of lobbying on defection consistently decreases with the lopsidedness of the referendums. Hence, the main finding rapidly becomes substantively insignificant or lose its statistical reliability once the district’s preferences become clear (or the referendum becomes mildly lopsided). In other words, ties to sectional groups increase the likelihood of voting with the district’s majority.

Likewise, MPs ties to cause group strengthen the link between MPs and voters, but the strengthening effect declines as the referendum becomes more lopsided. Model 2 shows that the coefficient of the main effect of the number of cause groups on defection is negative. This indicates that as the number of cause groups associated with an MP increases, MPs are less likely to defect from the electorate.
when the margin of victory is very narrow. As the electorate becomes more unequivocally in favor of one side of the issue, the referendum becomes more lopsided, the effect of cause interest groups vanishes. Panel (b) in Figure 1 shows the decline of the effect of cause groups on defection. More precisely, the negative association between MP’s ties with cause groups, and MP’s defection is statistically significant in this direction for referendums with a margin of victory of 74.2%/25.8% or lower. Although these referendums constitute most of the observations in the sample—about 78% of the observations—the effect of cause-group lobbying on defection strikingly weakens as a referendum ultimately ends up lopsided—or as the signal of the majority’s preference is clarified.

In sum, there is evidence to reject hypothesis 1, which states that the effect of lobbying by cause groups on MPs’ defection is constant along the values of the margins of victory of the referendums. Instead, there is evidence that cause groups’ lobbying strengthens the MP–citizen link, lowering the chances of defection, only when the electorate is narrowly divided, yet their effect substantively weakens when the signal of the majority’s preference of the electorate becomes more obvious.

Robustness checks

A potential concern from these model specifications is that there might be some unobserved heterogeneity across parties, cantons, and referendums that might explain these above results. First, political parties constitute another important principal for MPs beyond voters and interest groups. Thus, some MPs may be affiliated with some interest groups because their party membership requires them to be affiliated with certain interest groups or they may seek congruence with their party instead. A second concern is that some cantons, such as larger cantons, might be more central to the political system and, therefore, more likely to have ties with interest groups and distinct rates of defection. Finally, a third type of argument could be made that the characteristics of referendums might affect the lopsidedness of a referendum, the strength of the interest groups’ influence as well as the likelihood of defection.

To alleviate these concerns, I proceed in two ways. First, models include an MP-level control for relevant observed confounders, namely, MPs’ congruence with the official position of the party, and a set of referendum-level control variables. The inclusion of observed controls should reduce the concerns with respect to underlying omitted variable bias, although it falls short of entirely removing that concern. Second, model 3 includes party and canton fixed effects, and models 4 and 5 further add referendum fixed effects. These model specifications control for unobserved omitted variables that are invariant across MPs that belong to the same party, unobserved omitted variable that are invariant across MPs from the same canton, and unobserved omitted variables that are invariant across observations in a referendum. In addition, model 5 clusters the standard errors at the MP level to correct for the fact that behavioral observations of the MPs over time across different referendums are not independent. In other words, these models provide the most stringent test to my hypothesis because they focus on within-party, within-canton, and within-referendum variation alone and, thus, alleviate all concerns of omitted variable bias with respect to party-, canton-, or referendum-specific characteristics.

In the main analyses, I follow the most recent contribution in this area by GK (2016) to generate the total number of cause and sectional groups. Because the theoretical section conjectures that the effects of each type of groups will go in distinct directions, using the total number of interest groups would mean that the effects of distinct types of groups would cancel each other out. In practice, however, cause and sectional interest groups might not always be easy to classify. As a robustness check, Table 1A reanalyzes the main models but using the total number of interest groups. As expected, the main coefficients and the interaction effect are generally smaller, but all remain in the expected direction and statistically significant. This evidence provides further empirical support for the decreasing-effect hypothesis.

A remaining concern is that the official and legal task of politicians in the National Council is to represent the entire nation although they are elected within their constituency. Consequently, Table 2A checks the robustness of the main findings with the outcome variable being defection with respect to the entire nation. Given the high correlation between the two measures,10 it is not surprising that although the magnitude is generally smaller, the results remain substantively unaltered.

Finally, one might consider that the decreasing-effect hypothesis is particularly relevant among those districts in which the district magnitude is small, as the connection between the representatives and the median voter is stronger (Portmann et al., 2012). Hence, we should be concerned about the mechanisms underlying the main findings presented above if we find out that the evidence exclusively hinges on electoral districts with large magnitudes. To test for this, Table 3A in the online Appendix reestimates the main models only for the sub-sample of cantons with five seats or less.11 Results remain substantively unaltered for representatives of this subgroup of districts.

Conclusion

Whether and when MPs defect from their constituents to support the preferred positions of certain types of interest groups is more nuanced than previously portrayed. The analysis offered in this article extends prior work on the influence of lobbying on representation. Specifically, I argued that a divided electorate is the context that
minimizes the costs of defection, allowing MPs to defect from their constituents to reap the benefits of pleasing the interest groups’ demands. Using widely used data from Swiss roll-call votes matched with popular vote, I show that MPs respond to both voters and interest groups, but the people’s voice dominates interest groups’ demands when the electorate in a district is clearly on one side of a policy issue. By contrast, interest groups are more likely to shape policy decisions when the electorate is narrowly divided.

These findings have important implications for theories of democratic representation, since they specify under which circumstances interest group lobbying influences legislative behavior. Specifically, they contribute to the literature on congruence and representation by showing that a narrowly divided electorate facilitates the distortionary effects of lobbying on representation. Citizens who live in districts in which there is usually a clear majority’s preference for one side of policy issues are more likely to have their interests represented than similar citizens who live in districts in which there is much disagreement over policy positions. From the point of view of interest groups, they are more likely to influence policy and have their preferences represented by MPs—even at the expense of voters’ preferences—in those districts in which citizens have very heterogeneous policy positions. In contrast, interest groups are less likely to influence MPs’ behavior in districts areas where citizens have a clear position over the issue. Consequently, the relative dispersion of interests in a district helps characterize the extent to which lobbying may distort the chain of democratic responsiveness between voters and representative, as well as the effectiveness of lobbying on shaping MPs’ behavior.

Furthermore, this article offers some avenues for future research. Further work may explore additional conditions under which interest groups are more likely to influence the responsiveness of legislators to their constituents such as the technical matters of the issues or their timing in the electoral cycle. Just as most work in the congruence literature, I measure ideological congruence and the clarity of the majority’s preferences at the level of cantonal constituencies. Yet, it is also possible that defection and the clarity at the level of the MPs’ own partisan constituency is of the highest relevance. Therefore, further work might extend this work by using finer grained data with observed preferences at the level of partisan cantonal constituencies.

In addition, the lack of direct measure of the preferences of interest groups in the referendums is a limitation of this work that also constitutes an opportunity for future research. Following Giger and Kluver (2016), this article builds on the assumption that the preferences of sectional (cause) groups are, on average, more likely to be contrary (in favor) of the preferences of the constituents. While this might be true on average, measuring the preferences of interest groups in every referendum might be a move forward to ensure that MPs defection from citizens is indeed geared to please the interest groups. Finally, external validity of these results beyond the case of Switzerland is difficult to assess from a single-country study. Consequently, I hope that further research is carried out in comparable countries to assess the extent to which the clarity of the majority’s preferences conditions the role of lobbying on legislators’ congruence beyond the case of Switzerland. Overall, this study makes an important contribution as it specifies a condition under which interest group lobbying suffices to override constituents’ preferences, but it also opens more avenues for future research when, why, and how lobbying affects the chain of democratic responsiveness in democratic political systems.

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The online appendices are available at: http://ppq.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data.

Notes
1. These results are based on proportionally elected politicians, from the Swiss Lower House of Parliament, see Stadelmann et al. (2016) for a replication paper using the majority-elected politicians from the Upper House. Findings do not extend to the Upper Chamber.
2. For an argument on the size of the winning majority and the extraction of political rents in another setting, see Kauder and Portrafke (2016).
3. This argument is consistent with the evidence showing that parties and candidates are less able to identify the policy platforms that voters prefer in heterogeneous constituencies (see Bailey and Brady, 1998; Ensley et al., 2009).
4. The current model depicts MPs as the agents of two principals: the interest group and their constituents. However, other stakeholders in the process are political parties. Even though the specification of the relationship between MPs and their parties is beyond the scope of this paper, I do account for them in the empirical section by adding a party-congruence control and party random and fixed effects (see the Research Design section for further details).
5. This simple utility equation assumes that the preferences of sectional interest groups are opposed to the interests of the expected majority of citizens and cause groups support the interests of the expected majority of citizens.
6. See Kriesi (2012) for further details on the Swiss direct-democracy institutions and procedures.
7. Among those MPs who indicated a tie with an interest group, 96% reported to hold an executive function (e.g., board member or president).
8. See GK (2016: 195–197) for further details on the construction of these variables.
9. The measure of salience was originally constructed by the media attention to the proposal by counting the number of mentions in leading newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* articles in the 3-month period before and after the referendum, see GK (2016) for more details.
10. The correlation between the two measures of defection in the dataset is 0.78.
11. They constitute the 14.4% of the observations in the sample.

**References**


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Joan Barceló is a PhD student at Washington University in St. Louis. He is interested in the study of representation, public opinion, and comparative political behavior. He has authored or co-authored some 10 articles in peer-reviewed academic journals and 3 chapters in academic books.