10 Patterns of support for the welfare state

The role of media and interpersonal communication in direct democratic votes in Switzerland (1996–2004)

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Introduction

For decades, popular support for social protection policies has been the focus of numerous studies in social sciences and beyond. The scholarly interest has been further sparked by recent developments in Western countries, which came to be known as a widespread 'retrenchment of the welfare state'. Against this general background, two focal questions are examined jointly in this chapter. The first, most general, question bears on the components of attitudes towards the welfare state. More specifically, this chapter is concerned with the antecedents of voting decisions, in the context of referendums on social protection measures in Switzerland (1996–2004). Drawing from the literature on welfare state attitudes, the determinants of voting decisions can be expected to vary depending on individual attributes such as normative orientations, cognitive skills, or utilitarian considerations. Long-term individual attributes will not be the focus of my investigation, though. Instead, special emphasis will be laid on the role of information in the formation of attitudes and voting decisions, and in particular on the role of information that derives from interpersonal communication.

It is beyond dispute that much knowledge about ballot issues is acquired through information provided by political actors in referendum campaigns. However, a long-standing question of survey research has been to determine through which channels citizens collect information that they use in making their vote choices. At least since the seminal studies of US presidential elections in the 1940s, a dichotomy between media information and interpersonal information has been put forward in the literature. Questioning the conventional wisdom that 'more than anything else people can move other people' (Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944: 158), some evidence has recently been accumulated in support of the thesis of 'massive media effects' (e.g. Zaller 1996). The available data on Swiss referendum votes do not allow me to pit these two hypotheses against one another. Rather, in keeping with recent research favouring the interactive aspects of media and interpersonal information, I will attempt to show whether and how

the two sources of influence can have conditional and reciprocal effects on one another (see also Morales in this volume).

In a second step, the outlined mechanisms are investigated further by speci-fying the role of moderators in the processing of information. Communication research suggests that the impact of interpersonal and media sources is facili-tated under certain circumstances, while it is inhibited in other cases. Indeed, contributions by Morales, Toka and Lup in this volume strongly point to the role of the political context in moderating the influence of media and interper-sonal information. Likewise, I will investigate the role of contextual variables in moderating media and interpersonal influence on voting in Swiss referendums.

Model and hypotheses

As explained above, I will address the question of how individuals use information delivered in referendum campaigns, distinguishing between media and interpersonal information. Three models can be distinguished in the polit-ical communication literature (e.g. Lazarsfeld *et al.* 1944; Chaffee 1975; Rogers 1983; Bandura 1994; Mondak 1995a; Lenart 1997; Beck *et al.* 2002; Schmitt-Beck 2003). First, an independence model postulates that media and interpersonal discussions have separate, non-interactive effects on opinion for-mation. This implies that the effects of the two sources are additive. For example, an increase in media influence (due, say, to an intensification of public debate on a vote issue) is unaffected by a similar increase in interper-sonal influence. Second, a *competitive model* assumes that media and interper-sonal effects are non-additive, since they are competing – so to speak – to determine citizens' voting decisions. When one of the two sources gains importance in shaping opinions, the other loses ground. This is because one source induces judgments and feelings that inhibit the acceptation of argu-ments put forward by the other source. Third, a reinforcement model also claims that media and interpersonal effects are interactive, but in this case the interaction is positive. Put differently, media exposure enhances the impact of face-to-face information; the other way around, discussions work to boost the effect of media information.

On the basis of these models I will formulate two hypotheses. In each case I proceed with alternative hypotheses because it is very difficult to tell ex ante which model applies to the situation at hand. As a matter of fact, the different models have been shown to apply to different empirical situations, depending on particular issues, on particular media, on the type of discussant involved, or on broad societal conditions (e.g. Merten 1988; Rafaeli 1990; Lenart 1994). There-fore, the validation of one or several hypotheses is an empirical question that can only be addressed with empirical data.

Hypothesis 1a: Media and interpersonal communications are independent, non-interactive, sources of information.

Hypothesis 1b: Media and interpersonal communications are competitive, interactive sources of information. Media exposure decreases the effects of interpersonal sources, and vice versa.

Hypothesis 1c: Media and interpersonal communications are reinforcing, interactive sources of information. Media exposure enhances the effects of interpersonal sources, and vice versa.

I will focus my investigation of exposure to interpersonal communications to the case of individuals who regularly discuss politics with other people, but who are *not* asked about their own advice and do *not* try to influence others. These individuals thus most closely correspond to 'followers', as defined in most accounts of interpersonal influence. I expect followers to be most influenced by information gathered from interpersonal contacts, because they are assumed to be neither too confident in their own opinions nor tuned off from their interpersonal environments.

The second focus of this chapter centres on the conditions under which the three above alternative hypotheses best apply. According to political communication research, several variables may play a role in this respect. However, only a couple of them can be tested empirically with the data at hand. I will focus on the moderating influence of contextual variables: the level of elite support for policies submitted to vote and the local climate of opinion within the voting population. To be sure, the effect of media and interpersonal information is also conditional on the influence of individual attributes such as voters' political knowledge and ideology. However, for space reasons these individual-level variables will be considered here only as control variables, as further explained below (pp. 00–00).

I take into account two elements of the political context. First, I argue that the level of elite support, as measured by votes in Parliament, matters for the formation of citizens' preferences. All other things equal, the acceptance of proposals among political leaders is a first hint of their acceptability in the general population (Lehner 1984; Sciarini and Trechsel 1996). It may be that elite support translates into campaigning efforts that shape the electorate's preferences, or that parties' voting recommendations are used as heuristic cues to decide on (often complex) ballot measures. Accordingly, the higher the acceptance of a ballot proposal in Parliament, the higher its approval at the polls.

Compared to interpersonal information, mass media information is likely to be more reflective of the balance of power in Parliament and to be more closely indexed to the relative strength of the supporters' and opponents' respective campaigns. Although journalists value the norms of autonomy, objectivity and control over official news, they are nonetheless expected to perform their orientation function by reporting on the issues and events that they perceive as important in the political arena (e.g. Eilders 2002). In addition, in heterogeneous Switzerland, media coverage is usually quite homogeneous across regions in spite of a segmented media system (Tresch 2008). In contrast, interpersonal

information is not constrained by professional norms, it is less responsive to
the dynamics of the political agenda, it is less driven by (though certainly
related to) elite debates and it is less nationally cohesive. In addition, inter-
personal information is more likely to match citizens' initial opinions than
media information. This is because citizens can avoid uncongenial informa-
tion by 'isolating' in supportive interpersonal micro-contexts, whereas they
may find it more difficult to select media sources that are consistent with their
own political leanings (Mutz and Martin 2001). As a consequence, we may
expect that the directional thrust of interpersonal information is more invari-
ant across levels of elite support than is the directional balance of media
information. When elites are divided over voting issues, media coverage
should also be relatively two-sided, while interpersonal information at the
local level should be more clearly tilted towards one side. More importantly,
both media and interpersonal sources are thought to be less effective as a
function of their internal 'divisiveness' (i.e. two-sided information flows exert
less influence than one-sided flows). Accordingly, in cases of elite division
interpersonal information should prevail over media information as a determi-
nant of voting decisions – unless it is also largely divided and thus hardly
helpful in reaching a decision.

However, the argument can be developed to account for the contextual effect
of interpersonal information. As a second indicator of the political context, I will
take into account the level of support for the welfare state within local popula-
tions, in order to approximate the degree to which local communities may exer-
cise social pressure on their members. The formation of majorities at the
community level conveys a type of social information of which many citizens
may be partially or totally unaware, while others consciously use it to arrive at
decisions ('consensus heuristic'; see Mutz 1998). When local communities are
rather critical of welfare policies, it is to be expected that interpersonal conversa-
tions have a negative impact on voting decisions; conversely, in pro-welfare
communities, interpersonal exchanges should have a positive impact on voting
decisions. In contrast, the influence of media information should be enhanced
when local communities are divided over a voting issue. This hypothesis reflects
the argument that badly structured choice situations (as should be the case of
many citizens in divided communities) are conducive to increasing the reliance
on the mass media (e.g. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). Likewise, as a third
hypothesis, I propose that the level of elite support itself, rather than (or in addi-
tion to) media information, influences voting decisions when local opinion is
divided.

My next hypothesis thus specifies that the influence of media and interper-
sonal sources is contingent on the directional balance of information made avail-
able in referendum campaigns.

Hypothesis 2a: In the aggregate, when political elites are divided over a
ballot measure, the impact of media sources is inhibited and the impact of
interpersonal sources is enhanced.

Hypothesis 2b: In the aggregate, when local opinion is divided over a ballot measure, the impact of media sources is heightened and the impact of interpersonal sources is inhibited.

Hypothesis 2c: In the aggregate, when local opinion is divided over a ballot measure, the level of elite support itself is used as a voting cue.

As sketched out above, I will test these hypotheses controlling for the effect of individual-level variables that have been shown to be related to voting on welfare-state issues. Drawing on various theoretical and empirical works (e.g. McGuire 1985; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989; Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989; Shapiro and Young 1989; Feldman and Zaller 1992; Zaller 1992; Svallfors 1997; Andress and Heien 2001; Schmitt-Beck 2003), I selected five individual attributes: issue knowledge, the personal salience of ballot proposals, uncertainty about the proposals, left–right self-placement and personal interest in the issues at stake.

Elaboration of indicators

Empirical data

My analysis is based on secondary survey data. As Swiss citizens can vote on ballot issues two-to-four times a year, a survey is routinely carried out in the two weeks following the votes. These so-called 'Vox surveys' are quota-sampled to reflect linguistic regions, gender, professions, dwelling place and age groups. All surveys pertaining to welfare state issues (i.e. unemployment, labour-market policy, pension system, education and family policy and health policy, including maternity insurance) were selected for analysis. Fortunately, most questions display a high degree of cross-temporal comparability, and all measurements used in this chapter were virtually identical from one ballot issue to the next. In total, 22 ballot issues, for which all relevant indicators were available, were selected in the period from December 1996 to September 2004 (see Appendix 10.1). The surveys contain about 1,000 respondents, with the exception of three surveys containing about 2,000. All surveys were weighted to have the same number of cases, and aggregated for the forthcoming analysis.

Exposure to interpersonal communications

The measurement of interpersonal communication is based on three items available for the whole 1996–2004 period. The first item (*polit*) asked: 'How often do you discuss politics with your friends and relatives? Would you say: often [1], rarely [2], or never [3]?' The second item (*politd*) asked: 'How often do other people ask you for your opinion when there is a political decision to take? Would you say: often [1], rarely [2], or never [3]?'. Finally, the third item (*politu*) asked: 'If you are deeply convinced of something with respect

to some political issue, do you try to persuade your friends and relatives to share your views? Would you say that this happens often [1], rarely [2], or never [3]?'

On the basis of these three items, I created a dummy variable to define a specific 'role' individuals may assume in interpersonal networks. The variable FOLLOWER is assigned to the non-zero value for all respondents who mentioned being often involved in interpersonal contacts (*polit*), but who at the same time reported being rarely or never asked about their opinion (*politd*) and stated that they rarely or never try to influence others (*politu*). In the total sample, about 17 per cent of respondents qualify as 'followers'. This low number is not surprising in light of the fact that some 60 per cent of respondents in the sample reported that they never or only rarely discuss politics. As argued above, followers may be most susceptible to information gathered in interpersonal contacts, because they are rather interested in politics and attuned to their interpersonal environments, but probably lack confidence in their own opinions and are open to revising them. In other words, followers can be distinguished from both 'opinion leaders' and 'non-discussants' (or 'isolated individuals'; see, for example, Merten 1988). As a matter of fact, in a replication of the following analyses, adding a specific term for opinion leaders yielded no difference between leaders and non-discussants. Hence 'non-followers' will hereafter refer to all respondents who are not defined as followers; that is, both people who do not regularly discuss politics *and* opinion leaders.

Media exposure

Empirical measures of exposure to mass media information are often misguided, because many of them fail to take into account the specific effects of different sources or media, which cancel each other out in the aggregate (e.g. Zaller 1996). More often than not, information flows are two-sided and provide individuals with contradictory messages that push them in opposite directions. In such instances, the 'net media effects' are usually far smaller than the 'total media effects' that emerge when measuring the impact of each separate source or message.

Respondents were presented a list of ten different media (newspapers; radio; television; government's information booklet; prints; ads; street posters; letters to the editor; street stands; direct mailing). For each of them, they were simply asked to mention whether they recalled using it to make up their minds about the ballot issues. Hence, the data does not allow me to disaggregate the effects of discrete messages or discrete media outlets. However, to avoid an even more serious loss of quality in exposure measures due to data aggregation, I searched for the media with the largest effects on voting.[1] For each separate issue, three 'pro' (i.e. eliciting support for social protection) and three 'anti' media were retained. The responses were added in an index ranging from 0 to 3, indicating how many PRO-WELFARE MEDIA and ANTI-WELFARE MEDIA respondents used to form their opinions.

Contextual variables

The general context of voting ballots is made up of three variables. First, the LEVEL OF ELITE SUPPORT was measured as the percentage of votes in favour of welfare policies (or against anti-welfare proposals) that was recorded in the lower chamber of the Swiss Parliament (National Council). It ranges between 30.2 per cent and 100 per cent, with a mean of 57.5 per cent. Most anti-welfare majorities are to be found in the last four years of my investigation period (2000–2004), where, for example, proposals to reform the pension system faced hostility from the right-wing majority in Parliament or low-key, limited expansion proposals (e.g. disability insurance) were brought with substantial opposition before the people. As my hypotheses imply specific expectations for intermediate levels of elite support, the squared level of elite support will be entered simultaneously with the original variable.

Second, the CLIMATE OF LOCAL OPINION is an important moderator variable in my model. Regardless of the operational definition of interpersonal communication, there is no way to guess the directional balance (i.e. pro- or anti-welfare) of interpersonal information received by followers and other citizens. Therefore, it is impossible to assign a priori a positive or negative thrust to inter-personal conversations, which may prove detrimental for the detection of effects from contradictory environments. To limit this drawback, I relied on a measure of the climate of opinion within the respondents' environments. I used the per-centage of acceptance of ballot proposals in each Swiss canton, and converted it into a measure of acceptance of social protection. I used this measure to divide the sample into three subgroups corresponding to 'one-sided anti-' contexts (0–40 per cent yes to social protection; 38 per cent of cases), 'two-sided' con-texts (40–60 per cent yes; 27 per cent of cases), and 'one-sided pro-' contexts (60–100 per cent yes; 35 per cent of cases). This measure is admittedly crude, since it is based on an ex post assessment of what the balance of conversations in large communities might have been. However, it allows me to predict in which direction interpersonal discussions likely pushed respondents, and in par-ticular those that I defined as 'followers'.

Control variables

I first control for varying baselines of support for the welfare state between the various ballots, as this variation has to do with the particular properties of the ballot proposals and is unrelated to the effect of the variables in the model. Given the contemporary financial situation of the Swiss state and households, policies that aim to reduce social protection should generate greater support for the exist-ing welfare system than policies that seek expansion of social protection (see Ullrich 2000). Thus, the framing of ballot measures was assessed by distinguish-ing three types of ballots: (1) proposals seeking EXPANSION of the welfare system; (2) proposals seeking RETRENCHMENT of the system; and (3) POPU-LIST proposals.[2] All votes are listed with their assigned type in Appendix 10.1.

Five individual-level variables were selected as control variables for predicting votes on welfare state issues. First, the KNOWLEDGE variable is based on four questions asking respondents about (1) the general theme of the ballot, (2) its content, (3) its outcome (yes/no), and (4) the voting recommendation issued by the federal government. For each question respondents were assigned a score of 1 if they gave a correct answer and a score of 0 otherwise. Summing all scores yields a variable ranging from 0 (no knowledge at all) to 4 ('perfect' knowledge). Second, the UNCERTAINTY variable is a dummy ranging from 0 (decision rather easy to take) to 1 (decision rather difficult, or don't know). The exact question reads: 'On the basis of received information, was it rather easy or rather difficult to figure out the personal consequences of [name of the project]?' Third, I measured the respondents' IDEOLOGY by their self-placement on a traditional 11-point left–right scale. In the (very rare) cases where respondents did not volunteer an answer to the left–right question but responded to a party identification question, I recoded these responses into a left–right placement.[3] Fourth, the PERSONAL SALIENCE of issues is tapped by a question about the 'personal significance' of the ballot issues; it reads: 'Give me a number between 0 and 10. 0 means no importance at all, and 10 means a very high importance. How important was the [name of project] for you personally?' Fifth, to account for utilitarian influences on voting, for each vote I chose the three socio-demographic variables with the highest effect on voting decisions, out of an average of five variables that were considered relevant to define groups directly concerned by the proposal (e.g. SES, categories of non-active persons, profession, etc.). These variables were selected to measure three 'target groups' in each situation. Items were standardized across vote issues and added in a composite index of SELF-INTEREST, where positive values indicate a collective disposition to vote in favour of the existing social protection system.

Voting decisions

Similarly to the measure of elite support, voting decisions were recoded so that the higher value (1) corresponds to 'pro-welfare' decisions, whereas the lower value (0) is attributed to 'anti-welfare' decisions. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, logistic regression will be used to estimate the impact of information and moderator variables.[4]

Empirical analysis

Test of Hypothesis 1

The first question raised in this contribution is whether and how interpersonal information and media information interact in influencing voting decisions on welfare issues. To explore this question, voting decisions were simply cross-tabulated with both types of variables. Figure 10.1 shows the difference in support for welfare policies between followers and non-followers as a function
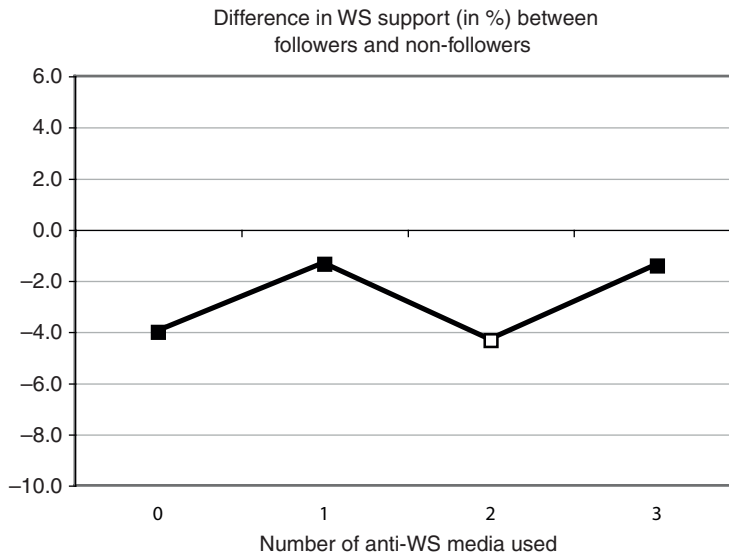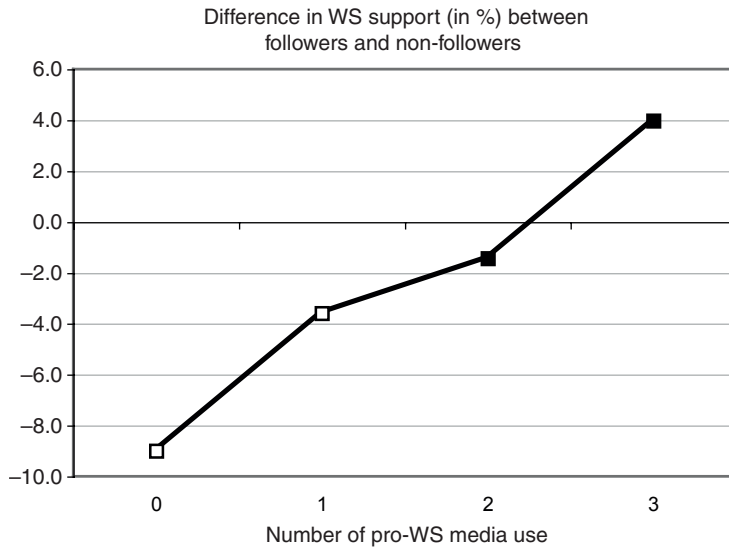
Difference in WS support (in %) between
followers and non-followers

Number of pro-WS media use

Difference in WS support (in %) between
followers and non-followers

Number of anti-WS media used

Figure 10.1 Aggregate level of welfare support for different categories of respondents.

of their respective use of 'pro-welfare' and 'anti-welfare' media. It should be emphasized that the figure shows *differences* between categories (i.e. followers minus non-followers), and not absolute levels of support. These levels always increase (or decrease) along with the number of pro-welfare (or anti-welfare) media used by respondents.

Figure 10.1 suggests an interaction between the use of 'pro-welfare' media and the role of follower. Followers were found to be more supportive of the welfare system than non-followers to the extent that they used three pro-welfare media. To the extent that they used fewer than three such media, they were actually less supportive than non-followers. No similar relationship can be observed with respect to the use of anti-welfare media. To sum up, my first investigation of the media–interpersonal nexus suggests that seeking others' advice enhances the impact of media information that is biased towards welfare state support. However, the reasons for the asymmetrical effectiveness of pro- and anti-welfare information remain unclear. While Hypotheses 1a and 1b are to be rejected, Hypothesis 1c is only partially supported.

Test of Hypothesis 2

In this section, I explore how the context of ballot measures influences voting decisions and the way in which 'followers' process information. In particular I observe whether and how the level of elite support and the climate of local opinion interact with both media and interpersonal information in influencing voting decisions. I thus check whether the effect of interpersonal sources becomes more evident when looked at separately within specific contexts. In addition, if indeed interpersonal sources appear to be ineffective in divided local communities (Hypothesis 2b), it remains to be seen what alternative sources of 'information' (in the larger sense) are used in such contexts.

Figure 10.2 displays the relative level of support for the welfare system among followers and non-followers, as a function of the number of pro-welfare media used and of the climate of local opinion (see the section on contextual variables). It is clear that assuming the role of 'follower' in interpersonal exchanges enhances the effect of pro-welfare media, *except in communities that are divided over the ballot issues*. Thus, contrary to Hypothesis 2b, there seems to be positive reinforcement (rather than competition) between media and interpersonal sources, *except* when community opinion is split between acceptance and rejection of welfare policies.

In order to find out how citizens make their voting decisions in divided communities, I will now consider the effect of local opinion in more detail. To avoid too many and too complex interactions between predictors, I will provide for the role of local contexts by dividing the sample into three groups corresponding to 'one-sided pro-welfare', 'divided' and 'one-sided anti-welfare' local communities. I can thus test the hypothesis that elite support serves as a heuristic cue for citizens in divided communities, because they cannot infer a clear 'consensus heuristic' from their interpersonal environments. Rather, citizens in such contexts may use the behaviour of their representatives in Parliament (and the voting recommendations that stem from elite behaviour) as voting cues. Further, the level of elite support may interact with the intensity of media use, because elite support cannot be experienced directly, but only through mass media coverage. Table 10.1 presents the results of the model for each type of context.
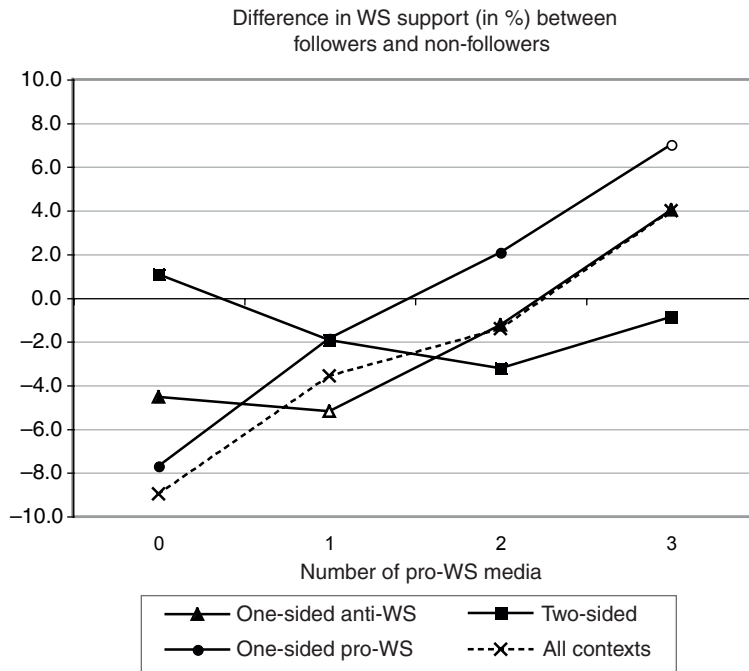
Difference in WS support (in %) between
followers and non-followers

Figure 10.2 Aggregate level of welfare support among followers and non-followers for different media exposure levels and in different types of local communities.

Beginning with one-sided anti-welfare contexts, one may first notice that the influence of the media appears very weak, either as direct effects or in inter-action with other variables. One exception is the interaction between the number of anti-welfare media used and the squared level of elite support. This effect sug-gests that anti-welfare media were not effective when elite support was interme-diate, but that they did matter for voting decisions when the elite was either clearly supportive or clearly unsupportive. Converting the regression coefficients into probabilities, increasing the number of anti-welfare media from zero to three translates into a 0.34 and 0.27 lower predicted likelihood of voting in favour of welfare policies in cases of small (–1 sd) and large (+1 sd) elite support, respec-tively, while it brings about a slightly higher likelihood of welfare support in cases of average elite support (i.e. holding other variables constant, as will be done throughout the rest of this section). A similar interaction was observed between elite support and the role of 'follower'. Followers were more supportive of the welfare state than non-followers, but only when Parliament was divided (about 0.10 higher likelihood of pro-welfare voting). In other situations, follow-ers were actually less enthusiastic about welfare policies than were non-followers (about 0.20 difference). This is clearly inconsistent with Hypothesis 2a.

In divided local contexts, the results suggest that the level of elite support for the welfare system may have been used as a heuristic, thus consistent with

Table 10.1 Moderator model of information effects on voting pro-welfare in different types of local communities (logistic regression coefficients)

Independent variables		One-sided anti-WS		Two-sided		One-sided pro-WS	
		B	(s.e.)	B	(s.e.)	B	(s.e.)
Block 1	Knowledge	0.07	0.05	0.13*	0.05	0.19***	0.05
	Personal salience	0.49***	0.05	0.34***	0.05	0.30***	0.05
	Uncertainty	0.01	0.04	−0.04	0.04	−0.08*	0.04
	Ideology	−0.93***	0.05	−0.75***	0.05	−0.45***	0.04
	Self-interest	0.34***	0.04	0.29***	0.04	0.22***	0.04
	Retrenchment proposals[a]	0.24**	0.09	0.10*	0.05	0.18***	0.06
	Populist proposals[a]	—	—	0.03	0.05	0.46***	0.04
	Elite support	0.11	0.08	0.39**	0.13	−0.11	0.18
	(Elite support)^2	−0.39†	0.24	−0.34†	0.20	−0.05	0.13
Block 2	Follower (fwer)	0.17†	0.10	−0.19†	0.11	−0.06	0.06
	Pro-media (pro)	0.05	0.10	0.35***	0.11	−0.03	0.07
	Anti-media (anti)	0.04	0.11	−0.22*	0.10	−0.03	0.07
	Fwer × pro	−0.06	0.10	−0.14	0.12	−0.04	0.08
	Fwer × anti	−0.21*	0.11	−0.09	0.12	0.11	0.07
Block 3	Elite support × fwer	0.01	0.08	−0.07	0.11	−0.23	0.16
	Elite support × pro	−0.10	0.09	0.22†	0.13	−0.69***	0.18
	Elite support × anti	0.11	0.09	0.01	0.11	0.74***	0.18
	Elite support × fwer × pro	−0.06	0.08	−0.03	0.13	−0.40*	0.20
	Elite support × fwer × anti	−0.08	0.08	−0.05	0.12	0.38*	0.19
	(Elite support)^2 × fwer	−0.69**	0.25	0.36	0.24	0.15	0.12
	(Elite support)^2 × pro	0.25	0.26	−0.46*	0.22	0.51***	0.14
	(Elite support)^2 × anti	−0.66**	0.25	0.09	0.20	−0.64***	0.14
	(Elite support)^2 × fwer × pro	0.32	0.25	0.15	0.25	0.31*	0.15
	(Elite support)^2 × fwer × anti	0.45†	0.26	0.21	0.24	−0.30*	0.14
	Constant	−0.69***	0.11	0.07	0.10	0.68***	0.11
	Chi^2 for block 1 (df)	789.6*** (8)		521.3*** (9)		409.1*** (9)	
	Chi^2 for block 2 (df)	33.1*** (5)		18.5** (5)		63.9*** (5)	
	Chi^2 for block 3 (df)	23.2** (10)		13.0 (10)		36.8*** (10)	
	Chi^2 for whole model (df)	846.0*** (23)		552.8*** (24)		509.8*** (24)	
	−2LL	4,096.9		3,881.6		4,355.5	
	Pseudo-R^2 (Nagelkerke)	0.27		0.21		0.17	
	N	3,955		3,216		4,208	

Notes

a reference category = expansion proposals. *** $p<0.001$; ** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$; † $p<0.10$. All variables standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

Hypothesis 2c. As a matter of fact, voting in favour of the welfare system was much more likely when elite support was rather strong, but not at its strongest level (as evidenced by the negative squared term). However, as the elite support vs. media interaction shows, this pattern holds only among citizens who used pro-welfare media in the first place – for people who used no such media, the level of elite support hardly had any impact on voting. Thus, for levels of elite support slightly above average, increasing the number of pro-welfare media from zero to three translates into a full 0.25 higher predicted likelihood of voting in favour of welfare policies. This makes sense insofar as elite support must be communicated by the media for citizens to be able to use it as an alternative voting cue in the absence of clear signals from interpersonal environments. Let us also stress that both pro-welfare and anti-welfare media had their strongest direct influence on voting in these local communities with split opinion about welfare policies, thus lending support to Hypothesis 2b.

Finally, the level of elite support did not have as strong an effect in pro-welfare communities as in divided communities. Nevertheless, it was involved in various interactions with communication variables. First, pro-welfare media were much more effective in attracting pro-welfare votes when Parliament was rather opposed to the welfare system and was thus at odds with local senti-ments. Similarly, anti-welfare media were much more successful in getting anti-welfare votes when parliamentary opinion was contradicted by local opinion. In cases of low elite support (i.e. –0.5 sd; lower levels were virtually non-existent in reality), increasing the number of (pro-welfare or anti-welfare) media from zero to three translates into a (positive or negative) change of about 0.30 in the predicted likelihood of voting in favour of welfare policies. For higher levels of elite support, the predicted impact of the media was more limited and even pos-sibly counterproductive. In addition, these results are qualified by the three-way interactions between elite support, media use and the role of follower. One of the many ways of looking at these interactions is to observe that, within com-munities that are at odds with parliamentary elites, the influence of the media was especially pronounced among followers. In the rare cases of low elite support, a three-unit increase in the number of (either pro-welfare or anti-welfare) media is predicted to yield a 0.55 change in the likelihood of pro-welfare voting among followers, while it amounts to about 0.30 among non-followers. Moreover, the predicted rate of change in the probability of pro-welfare voting induced by media exposure declines sharply as a function of elite support among followers, while the decay is much more gradual among non-followers.

In sum, the evidence is consistent with Hypotheses 2b and 2c, but not with Hypothesis 2a. When local opinion is divided over an issue, the impact of media sources is heightened, and the level of elite support is likely to be used as a voting cue. No clear evidence could be adduced to show the impact of interper-sonal sources in divided communities, though. Furthermore, some of the non-hypothesized information effects evidenced in non-divided contexts deserve further examination.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study I have tested several hypotheses about the processing of political information by citizens and its consequences for voting decisions. Applying the model to survey data about 22 ballot votes on social policy in Switzerland (1996–2004), my study yielded a number of results.

By and large, my analysis points to a reinforcement mechanism between media and interpersonal information. That is, citizens who asked for others' advice were more susceptible to the influence of the media that they used to make up their minds about the ballot issues. The mechanisms leading to reinforcement are unclear though, as this question cannot be addressed with the data at hand. On the one hand, media information may 'set the agenda' for interpersonal conversations, which might then serve to crystallize opinions brought about by the media. Alternatively, voters may become aware of issues through conversations and may then use media information to validate information and ideas acquired through interpersonal exchanges.

I found two important exceptions to the general reinforcement pattern, though, and a number of qualifications. First, the interaction between the role of 'follower' in interpersonal exchanges and media exposure is limited to the case of media that promoted the acceptance of the welfare system. Clear-cut results could not be obtained with respect to 'anti-welfare' media. Second, the reinforcement between the role of 'follower' and exposure to pro-welfare media does not seem to apply to situations where popular opinion was divided at the local level. I hypothesized that in such situations citizens cannot resort to some 'consensus heuristic' from their interpersonal environments.

However, information effects are qualified by the role of moderator variables, allowing me to describe the situation of divided local contexts as a 'special case' rather than as an 'exception'. Indeed, the conclusion that interpersonal and media information do not interact in such contexts is mitigated by considering the role of elite support. The degree of support for ballot proposals in Parliament may serve as a substitute to political discussions, since voters' support for welfare policies was highest in cases where elite support was moderately strong. The fact that voters' support was *not* strongest for ballot issues that received the strongest support in Parliament makes sense to the extent that undisputed issues usually give way to few mobilization efforts and to unimportant referendum campaigns. Therefore the leaders' position is less easily communicated in such cases than when ballot proposals enjoy less support in Parliament but lead to more intense referendum campaigns. Further, this relation holds only for citizens who used the media in the first place, suggesting that elite support is communicated through the media or that referendum campaigns (which are usually reflective of the balance of power in Parliament) play a key role in the formation of voting decisions.

Besides, the level of support in Parliament was also found to matter in the other types of local contexts. First, in local environments predominantly opposed to welfare policies, the capacity of anti-welfare media and interpersonal informa-

tion to alienate voters from the welfare system was severely constrained when the Parliament was divided over issues. It may be that information is less effective (or its measurement through simple indicators less valid) when political leaders are divided, because the total information flow is then usually more intense and less biased towards a single viewpoint. Second, in local contexts that predominantly endorsed the welfare system, the media were especially effective to the extent that these contexts were at odds with anti-welfare votes in Parliament. It would take us well beyond the scope of this discussion to analyse the reasons for this interaction; however, it should be noted that such 'people against elites' situations are quite exceptional.

These results are all the more significant as they were obtained after controlling for the influence of variables known to be strong predictors of welfare state voting (ideology, self-interest, etc.). Nevertheless, the model tested here is only moderately successful in explaining voting decisions on welfare policy. There might be at least three reasons why only limited effects emerged from the analysis. First, the measurement of media and interpersonal communication flows is arguably less than ideal. Second, real effects may indeed be modest. In fact, other research (e.g. Marquis 2006) has shown that the potential for referendum campaigns and face-to-face contacts to influence Swiss voters is rather limited. Third, although the effects of media and interpersonal information appear weak, one should stress that these variables interact with contextual variables and that their effect is indirect rather than direct.

Another point of criticism, levelled against many analyses of social policies using survey data, points to the ambiguity of the concept of 'welfare state support' (for a review, see Ullrich 2000). Although the problem is less serious here, because voting decisions are to be explained, and not elusive or superficial 'opinions', one may cast doubt on the assumption that all respondents in my dataset are endorsing or opposing the same fundamental position towards the welfare state. Because no fewer than 22 ballot votes have been included in this analysis, representing at least five distinct domains of state intervention, the general goal of generalization pursued here can only be achieved at the expense of the specifics of each issue area. Thus it might be that my model accounts relatively well for decision-making towards some issues but that it requires better specification for other issues.

Acknowledgement

Appendix 10.1 List of ballot votes

Vox #	Date	Project	Project type
602	Dec. 1996	Law on labour: weekend and night work, maternity	Retrenchment
622	Sept. 1997	Financing of unemployment insurance	Retrenchment
643	Sept. 1998	Tenth amendment of pension system without increase of retirement age	Expansion
654	Nov. 1998	Law on labour: night work, maternity	Expansion[a]
684	June 1999	Law on disability insurance	Retrenchment
685	June 1999	Law on maternity insurance	Expansion
721	Nov. 2000	Initiative against increase of retirement age for women	Expansion
722	Nov. 2000	Initiative for 'flexible retirement age from 62 years'	Expansion
724	Nov. 2000	Initiative for 'reduced hospital costs'	Populist
732	March 2001	Initiative for 'cheaper drugs'	Populist
752	Dec. 2001	Initiative to 'secure pension system – tax energy instead of labour'	Expansion
762	March 2002	Reduction of work time	Expansion
781	Sept. 2002	Initiative about gold reserves to retirement pension	Populist
782	Sept. 2002	Counter-proposal about gold reserves to retirement pension	Expansion
792	Nov. 2002	Law on unemployment insurance: unemployment benefits	Retrenchment
802	Feb. 2003	Participation of cantons in financing of hospital treatments	Expansion
815	May 2003	Initiative 'health must remain affordable'	Expansion
816	May 2003	Initiative 'equal rights for disabled people'	Expansion
819	May 2003	Initiative for 'sufficient apprenticeship places'	Expansion
831	May 2004	Eleventh amendment of pension system: increased retirement age for women	Retrenchment
832	May 2004	Financing of retirement pension through VAT increase	Expansion
844	Sept. 2004	Law on maternity insurance	Expansion

Note
a This project is difficult to assign to a particular category, since it contains both "expansion" and 'retrenchment' features. However, for the sake of simplicity, it was classified in the "expansion" category.

Notes

1 As a matter of fact, the impact of each single medium varies from one issue to the next. Because the effect of each medium is unknown a priori and unlikely to remain constant across the 22 ballot issues, allowing each medium to have a distinctive effect on the whole-sample voting measure would lead to a serious underestimation of media effects. However, the adopted solution (i.e. selecting only the media shown previously to exert the largest influence on voting decisions) raises concern about possible endogeneity bias, because the dependent variable is used to determine how individuals are distributed over the values of the explanatory variables. However, as pointed out by Terza *et*

al. (2008), standard methods of checking for endogeneity (e.g. the instrumental varia-
bles method) are not suited for models with binary dependent variables. As a first rough
assessment of endogeneity bias, I simply estimated the covariance between the media
variables and the error term of the simple (logistic) model: vote$=C+B1$(pro-
media)$+B2$(anti-media)$+e$. This analysis shows the possible bias to be negligible.

2 Populist proposals emanate from right-wing nationalist parties and groups, and are
   opposed by other (in particular left-wing) parties. They consist of 'radical', often 'sim-
   plistic', solutions to welfare problems, usually charging 'big business', high-profit
   sectors, or available public wealth – such as proposals to reduce the price of drugs or to
   reallocate the National Bank's gold reserves to retirement pensions.

3 About 2 per cent of respondents were thus recoded into left–right categories (coding
   scheme available upon request from the author). Further, I also used party identifica-
   tion in order to remedy the problem of a very high concentration of responses at the
   scale midpoint. Respondents who identified with left parties were shifted one point to
   the left (i.e. 4) and the increment for right identifiers was one point to the right (i.e. 6).
   A non-recoded left–right variable was also used in the various analyses but differences
   were found to be immaterial.

4 One may ask about the opportunity of using alternative tools such as multilevel analy-
   sis (MLA), so as to allow for unexplained variability to be partitioned between differ-
   ent conceptual levels and to get more robust and realistic estimates of the variance of
   effects. However, it is not entirely clear whether MLA is appropriate to analysing my
   data. Because the number of higher-level units is rather low (i.e. 22 ballots) and, con-
   versely, the number of observations per unit is quite large (i.e. 517 respondents on
   average), the difference between traditional regression models and multilevel models
   is expected to be rather limited (Snijders and Bosker 1999: 44). In addition, it is doubtful
   that the rather heterogeneous basis of ballot votes investigated here can be regarded as
   a sample from a 'population of votes', in which the discrete units can be considered as
   interchangeable, as MLA implies.