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The World of Referendums

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Preface

We are pleased to present the *World of Referendums - 2024 Edition* report. It is the second such report compiled by a team at the *Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau* (ZDA) at the *University of Zurich*, Switzerland. The report is based on data contained in the unique *Referendum Database* (RDB). We define referendums as instances of “(...) [a] popular vote on an issue of policy that is organized by the state or at least by a state-like entity, such as the authorities of a de facto state” (Mendez and Germann 2016, 144). So defined, the referendum includes both votes on government proposals as well as citizens’ initiatives.

In this iteration of the *World of Referendums* report, our aim is to provide a graphical and descriptive assessment of institutional availability and referendum practice with a special focus on national and subnational referendums in Switzerland. As a word of caution, we would like to remind the reader that this is a largely atheoretical data report. The data presented may reveal many interesting patterns and further avenues for future analyses based on theories and concepts from democracy studies, institutionalism and comparative public policy.

This report has been thoroughly compiled and checked by the authors. Any mistakes that remain are our own. We are aware that the *Referendum Database* may contain inconsistencies or missing events. This is why we are grateful for your critical feedback via e-mail to feedback@rdb.vote.

Introduction to the RDB

The *Referendum Database* (RDB), formerly known as the *c2d Referendum Database*, is hosted by the *University of Zurich’s Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau* (ZDA), an academic research centre dedicated to the study of democracy in Switzerland and around the world.

The RDB is committed to the documentation of referendum results at the national and partly at the subnational level on a global scale, and in particular at the cantonal level for Switzerland. As of 2024, the RDB contains information on 3,000 referendums at the national level and 15,000 referendums at the subnational level in over 200 countries and territories worldwide since 1791. For Switzerland alone, the *Referendum Database* contains data on around 700 national referendums since 1793, and around 7,000 cantonal referendums since 1970. For each of these referendums, we have recorded the institutional context and characteristics such as the trigger, the question put forward to the voters, the turnout, the outcome, etc. In total, we collect around eighty data points for each referendum. The RDB can be accessed [here](#). Alternatively, the R package [rdb](#) is offered to access the database’s content directly.

History of the RDB

From 1994 to 2007, the Referendum Database was built up and developed at the *Centre for Research on Direct Democracy* (c2d) at the *Department of Constitutional Law* of the *University of Geneva*. The centre brought together researchers in law, political science and sociology studying direct democracy as institutions and political practice. The c2d promoted research on direct democracy from a pluridisciplinary perspective and also provided information, advice, and counselling on various aspects to public authorities (Auer and Bützer 2001). The Referendum Database was originally funded by the *Swiss National Science Foundation* (SNSF) project *Dynamique et actualité de la démocratie directe dans un Etat fédéral* grant no 39348 at the *University of Geneva*, directed by professors Andreas Auer and Hanspeter Kriesi. It was further developed with funds from the SNSF project *La démocratie communale en Suisse: vue générale, institutions et expériences dans les villes 1990–2000* grant no 59366, and other projects.

In fall 2007, the *Centre for Research on Direct Democracy* and the *Referendum Database* were migrated to the *Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau*. Maintenance and development of the RDB was defined as one of the founding purposes of the ZDA. In the following years, the database was further developed, extended, and improved; for example by closing gaps in the data on voting results in Swiss cantons or by automating the coding of international voting results. In 2018, the database was completely redesigned and made available in a new format.

Over the years, the RDB has served as the basis for more than fifty scientific publications on direct democracy in Switzerland and worldwide. To support these research efforts, the RDB strives to become the most comprehensive empirical collection on referendums worldwide. This is why we continue to improve the database and add further data, especially from votes at the subnational (state and local) levels. At the same time, we are overhauling the RDB data structure to better encompass the historical and current legal foundations of referendums. The RDB is to provide accurate, up to date, and easily accessible data for referendum researchers worldwide.

Concurrently, we valorize the existing data in the form of annual reports and academic publications. This is why we initiated this *World of Referendums* (WoR) report series. In addition, we strive to regularly publish cutting edge academic research on referendums around the world.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to pay homage to the founders of the *Referendum Database*, namely professors Andreas Auer, Jean-Daniel Delley and Hanspeter Kriesi, who all worked at the *Centre for Research on Direct Democracy* (c2d) at the *University of Geneva* at the time. Over the years, many additional people were involved in the development, maintenance and expansion of the *Referendum Database*.

Collaborators at the *University of Geneva* from 1994 to 2007 were in alphabetical order: Andreas Auer, Antje Beck, Marco Breitenmoser, Michael Bützer, Jean-Daniel Delley, Frédéric Esposito, Philippe Gerber, Sabine Haenni-Hildbrand, Guita Korvalian, Nicolas Kozuchowski, Reto Kreuzer, Hanspeter Kriesi, Claudio Mascotto, Jan Prince, Irène Renfer, Frank Schuler, Uwe Serdült, Bénédicte

Tornay, Alexander Trechsel, Nicolas von Arx, Valérie Vulliez-Boget, Tobias Zellweger, and Serge Zogg.

Collaborators at the *Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau* at the *University of Zurich* from 2007 until today in alphabetical order include: Mayowa Alaye, Corsin Bisaz, Salim Brüggemann, Lukas Christen, Magdalena Despotov, Juri Ezzaini, Norina Frehner, Louis Gebistorf, Micha Germann, Andreas Glaser, Robin Gut, Joey Jüstrich, Kymani Koelewijn, Daniel Kübler, Beat Kuoni, Irina Lehner, Sarah Lüthold, Fernando Mendez, Beat Müller, Joel Probst, Gabriela Rohner, Liana Sala, Uwe Serdült, Evren Somer, Gianluca Sorrentino, Anastasyia Souslova, Andrin Walla, Yanina Welp, Jonathan Wheatley, and Jonas Wüthrich.

A special thank you goes to the following persons for their inputs and critical comments on this edition of the *World of Referendums* report: Laurent Bernhard, Benjamin Böhler, Junmo Cheon, Michaela Fischer, Louis Gebistorf, Andreas Glaser, Gabriel Hofmann, Daniel Kübler, Luka Markić, Joel Probst, and Marine Trichet.

Part A.

Switzerland

Focus of our analysis

Switzerland is known for its direct democracy and large number of referendum votes. This is why we have compiled this analysis on Swiss national referendums since 1793, and Swiss cantonal referendums since 1970. We have not yet recorded earlier cantonal referendums into the *Referendum Database*. Also at the cantonal level, we have omitted *Landsgemeinde* votes from the analysis, because they have not yet been completely recorded. This means that we completely exclude the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus from the analysis. Votes in Nidwalden are included from 1997 onwards, votes in Appenzell Ausererrhoden from 1998 onwards, and votes in Obwalden from 1999 onwards. Furthermore, our database contains only few referendums at the municipal level, which is why we did not analyze the municipal level in more detail.

We use the internationally established nomenclature on popular votes, with the term *referendum* referring to any popular vote. Please note that this usage is broader than the common Swiss usage of the term “referendum”, which does not encompass citizens’ initiatives. In our analysis, we continue to distinguish between the *referendum* as a vote on a single question, and the *ballot date* as the date on which one or several referendums are held in a polity.

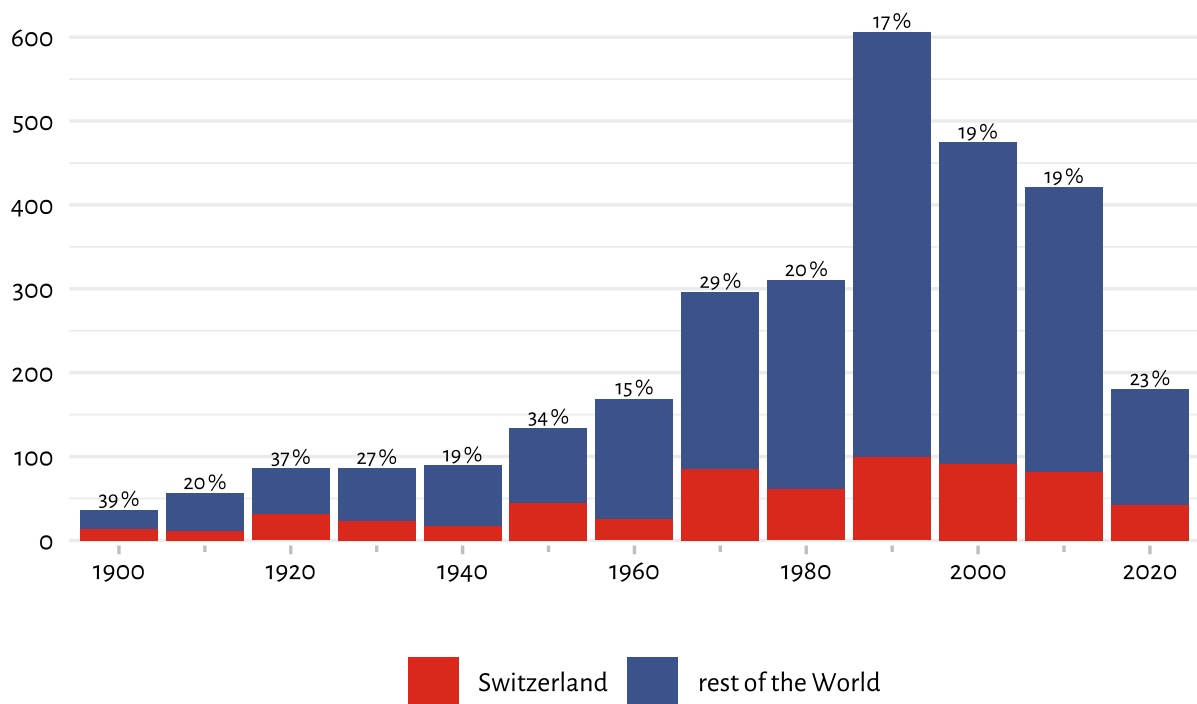
Report structure

In the following analysis, we first provide a big picture (Chapter 1), showing why Switzerland is unique with regard to the number of referendums. Afterwards, we compare these counts of referendums at the national and cantonal level (Chapter 2). Subsequently, the report delves into an analysis of types of referendums (Chapter 3), showing various attributes of different types of direct democratic instruments. Chapter 4 investigates the various topics that are voted on in referendums in Switzerland. Chapter 5 then proceeds with an empirical examination of the turnout, while Chapter 6 delves deeper into their outcomes. Chapter 7 examines the congruence between governmental/parliamentary recommendations and popular votes. Finally, we summarize our findings in Chapter 8 and provide an outlook for future research endeavors.

1. Big picture

1.1. Switzerland holds one fifth of all worldwide referendums

Figure 1.1.: Number of national referendums per decade comparing Switzerland to the rest of the world, 1900–2024



Total number of referendums: 2943

Figure 1.1 illustrates the evolution of national referendums worldwide from the 1900s until today, distinguishing between Switzerland and the rest of the world. The figure shows the absolute number of referendums per decade, and additionally depicts the share of Swiss referendums. The figure shows that throughout the last century, Switzerland has consistently played a significant role in holding referendums, especially in the earlier decades when referendums were relatively rare globally. From the latter half of the 20th century onward, there was a sharp rise in the number of referendums conducted by other countries. This reduced Switzerland's share of worldwide referendums, even as its absolute number of referendums remained stable.

Overall, the large number of referendum votes in Switzerland highlights the key role that direct democracy plays there (Hesse and Loser 2024). Today, every enfranchised Swiss citizen gets to vote on around a dozen referendums per year at the national, cantonal, and municipal level (Serdült 2024, 200).

1.2. National referendums

At the national level, the **mandatory referendum** and **citizens' initiative** for total revision of the constitution was introduced with the founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1848 (Serdült 2024, 200). In 1874, the **optional legislative referendum** was established. Since then, citizens can collect a certain number of signatures to force a popular vote on a federal law (Degen 2011).

For partial revisions of the constitution, the **citizens' initiative** was introduced at the federal level in 1891, thus enabling citizens to collect a certain number of signatures to force a vote on a partial constitutional revision (Degen 2016). For each citizen's initiative, the government or parliament can also formulate a **counter proposal**, and submit it to a popular vote along with the original initiative.

At the federal level, initiatives and referendums are mandated by Title 4, Chapter 2 of the Federal Constitution (Swiss Confederation 2024). For the *optional referendum*, 50,000 signatures need to be collected within 100 days, whereas for the *popular initiative* (termed as *citizens' initiative* in the following report), 100,000 signatures need to be collected within 18 months. The *mandatory referendum* is triggered automatically for amendments to the Federal Constitution, accessions to organizations for collective security or to supranational communities, and certain emergency legislation.

For *optional referendums* to be accepted, a simple majority of the popular vote is sufficient. In contrast, *citizens' initiatives* and *mandatory referendums* require a double majority of citizens and cantons.

1.3. Cantonal referendums

At the *cantonal level*, referendums were introduced in the 19th century (Serdült 2024). Already before, some Swiss cantons had institutionalized the *Landsgemeinde*, which is a cantonal citizens' assembly (Schaub 2016). The political rights of the citizens at the federal level were themselves inspired by cantonal models. Although direct democratic institutions exist in all cantons, there is a large variance. Direct democratic rights - computed through an index that encompasses measurements such as the necessary number of signatures or the deadlines - are strongest in the cantons of Glarus, Basel Landschaft and Appenzell Innerrhoden, whereas they are the weakest in Vaud, Ticino and Geneva (Stutzer 1999; Vatter 2013, 2024)

Below, we discuss cantonal similarities and differences with regard to their implementation of direct democratic instruments.

Minimum requirements under federal law

At the cantonal level, most political rights are fixed in the cantonal constitution. These constitutions underlie the minimum requirements found in Article 51 paragraph 1 of the Federal Constitution (Swiss Confederation 2024). This stipulates that the cantonal constitution must be a democratic one (Belser and Massüger 2015; Rhinow 2000, 84; Hangartner et al. 2023, 541). In addition, the consent of the citizens to the constitution is required. It must also be possible to revise the constitution at any time if the citizens demand so (Belser and Massüger 2015; Auer 2016, 231; Hangartner et al. 2023, 541).

This contrasts with the concept of non-amendable “eternity-clauses” such as those found in the German, French and Italian constitutions (Schmid 2020, 639). Contrary to these “eternal constitutions”, constitutions in Switzerland must be amendable at any time (Fedlex 1995, 993; Auer 2016, 236; Rhinow, Schefer, and Uebersax 2016, 154). Any amendment requires the consent of the citizens (Belser and Massüger 2015). A de facto ban on amendments, including any waiting periods, would therefore be unconstitutional (Schmid 2020, 645; Fedlex 1995, 993; Rhinow, Schefer, and Uebersax 2016, 154; Biaggini 2017, 563).

The Federal Constitution thus provides the cantons with the institutions of the mandatory constitutional referendum and the popular initiative for partial or total revision of the constitution (Auer 2016, 231; Buser 2011, 19; Rhinow 2000, 92; Tschannen 2021, 669). If a canton were to dispense of one of these two instruments, this would constitute a violation of Article 51 paragraph 1 of the Federal Constitution. Article 51 of the Federal Constitution also protects against anti-democratic developments in the federal state, since a minimum of direct democratic instruments is ensured (Belser and Massüger 2015). At the same time, the diversity and autonomy of the cantons is maintained. The cantons are free to grant the people additional rights (Hangartner et al. 2023, 541; Tschannen 2021, 669; Jaag 2020, 110).

The cantonal constitutions must not contravene federal law pursuant to Article 51 paragraph 2 of the Swiss Federal Constitution. If they do, the Federal Assembly will not approve the cantonal constitution. In the approval process, the Federal Assembly examines the cantonal constitution to ensure its compliance with federal law, particularly with Article 51, paragraph 1 of the Federal Constitution (Rhinow 2000, 84; Auer 2016, 236; Rhinow, Schefer, and Uebersax 2016, 172; Hangartner et al. 2023, 542).

Mandatory referendums

Mandatory referendums are those proposals that are subject to a referendum by virtue of the constitution or a law. These votes must be held ex officio. If such a bill is not put to a vote or is not accepted by the citizens, it does not enter into force (Auer, Malinverni, and Hottelier 2013, 201; Auer 2016, 415).

The minimum requirement under federal law in Article 51 paragraph 1 of the Federal Constitution requires the instrument of a mandatory constitutional referendum in all cantons (Auer, Malinverni, and Hottelier 2013, 201; Auer 2016, 231; Tschannen 2021, 669). This means that the authorities are obliged to submit every constitutional amendment to the voters, regardless of whether this proposal originates from the citizens in the form of a popular initiative, or from the cantonal parliament (Belser and Massüger 2015; Auer 2016, 231; Hangartner et al. 2023, 541).

In the case of a partial revision, the proposed constitutional amendment is voted on directly. In the case of a total revision, the citizens decide in a mandatory preliminary vote whether the revision should be drafted at all and often who will be responsible for this task. The authors of the new constitution can be the parliament or a constitutional council elected exclusively for this purpose. Once work on the new constitution has been completed, it is again subjected to a mandatory referendum (Auer 2016, 415; Jaag 2020, 110).

The cantons may extend this mandatory requirement under Article 51 paragraph 1 of the Federal Constitution by stipulating the mandatory refer-

endum for other matters in their constitution, or by means of a cantonal law (Tschannen 2021, 669; Hangartner et al. 2023, 541).

In addition, the cantons can also voluntarily subject other proposals to an optional referendum that are not already subject to a mandatory referendum under the constitution (Tschannen 2021, 268). In this case, the holding of a referendum is linked to a required number of signatures and a deadline determined by cantonal law (Auer 2016, 417). These referendums are listed here under the term *optional referendum*.

Cantonal differences

The Swiss cantons are considered to be the most direct democratic bodies in the world. In particular, they are more direct democratic than the Swiss Confederation because the range of matters subject to referendum is wider than at the federal level (Auer 2016, 1003). The rights of the people at the federal level are themselves inspired by cantonal models. In addition to the *mandatory constitutional referendum*, some cantons – namely Uri, Schwyz, Glarus, Solothurn, Basel Landschaft, Schaffhausen, Appenzell Innerrhoden and Aargau - also recognize the *mandatory legislative referendum*. In these cantons, changes to legislation must be put to a popular vote (Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 270).

In addition to the *mandatory legislative referendum*, various other forms of referendum have been established in the cantons. Some examples of these cantonal referendums are listed below. Within the framework of the so-called *administrative referendum*, not only laws and international and intercantonal treaties can be subject to a referendum, but also individual administrative acts, such as the awarding of licenses (Glaser 2012; Hangartner et al. 2023, 1627–28). In addition, the *budget referendum*, the *tax rate referendum*, the *referendum on fundamental decisions* and the *consultation referendum* are widespread direct democratic rights in the cantons (Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 280).

Territorial referendums are special, as they apply to changes in the territory of a canton pursuant to Article 53 paragraph 2 of the Federal Constitution and to territorial changes between cantons pursuant to Article 53 paragraph 3. These require the consent of the affected population and the cantons concerned. In the case of a change in the number of cantons, the consent of the citizens and the cantons throughout Switzerland is required (Hangartner et al. 2023, 1895–1900).

Another special form of referendum is the *constructive referendum*, also known as a *popular proposal*, in the cantons of Bern and Nidwalden (Glaser, Serdült, and Somer 2016, 1343; Hangartner et al. 2023, 2088–93). There, a certain number of citizens can force a referendum and put forward an alternative proposal to the bill passed by the cantonal parliament (Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 273). This procedure serves to avoid the failure of the entire bill by allowing only the disputed provisions to be challenged. In certain cantons, generally binding parliamentary resolutions and parliamentary ordinances are also subject to an optional referendum (Buser 2011, 132–33).

The *financial referendum*, which does not exist at the federal level, illustrates the cantonal diversity in Switzerland (Hangartner et al. 2023, 443). In Lucerne, a referendum is mandatory for one-off expenditures over 25 million Swiss francs or recurring expenditures over ten times the amount of an annual expenditure. Uri requires a referendum from CHF 500,000 for new expenditures or from CHF

50,000 for recurring expenditures if they are incurred over ten years. In Fribourg, the referendum applies to new net expenditures that exceed 1 % of the last approved government expenditure. Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Jura use referendums for expenditures that exceed defined thresholds for the tax unit or the state budget (Federal Supreme Court of Switzerland 1989, 141; Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 280; Hangartner et al. 2023, 1272). These cantonal regulations differ significantly in some cases and are exemplary of the diversity of referendums in Switzerland (Buser 2011, 138–42).

Landsgemeinden

Until the late 1990s, five cantons still had *Landsgemeinde* votes. Nidwalden abolished the *Landsgemeinde* in 1996, Appenzell Ausserrhoden in 1997, and Obwalden in 1998. Today, only Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus still hold the *Landsgemeinde*, the other 24 cantons vote at the ballot box (Buser 2011, 172; Auer 2016, 409; Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 197).

In Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus, all enfranchised citizens meet once a year to vote on a wide range of issues. Elections and votes at cantonal level are held by a show of hands (Buser 2011, 172; Auer 2016, 409; Jaag 2020, 117). The *Landsgemeinde* is regarded as the supreme authority of the respective cantons, although it does not replace parliament or the ballot box (Buser 2011, 172; Haller, Kölz, and Gächter 2020, 198; Jaag 2020, 117). The exact number of votes in favor of or against a proposal can only be estimated and cannot be determined precisely (Buser 2011, 172).

2. Number of referendums

2.1. Referendums and ballot dates over time

Figure 2.1.: Number of national & cantonal referendums & ballot dates per decade, 1870–2024 (national) & 1970–2024 (cantonal)

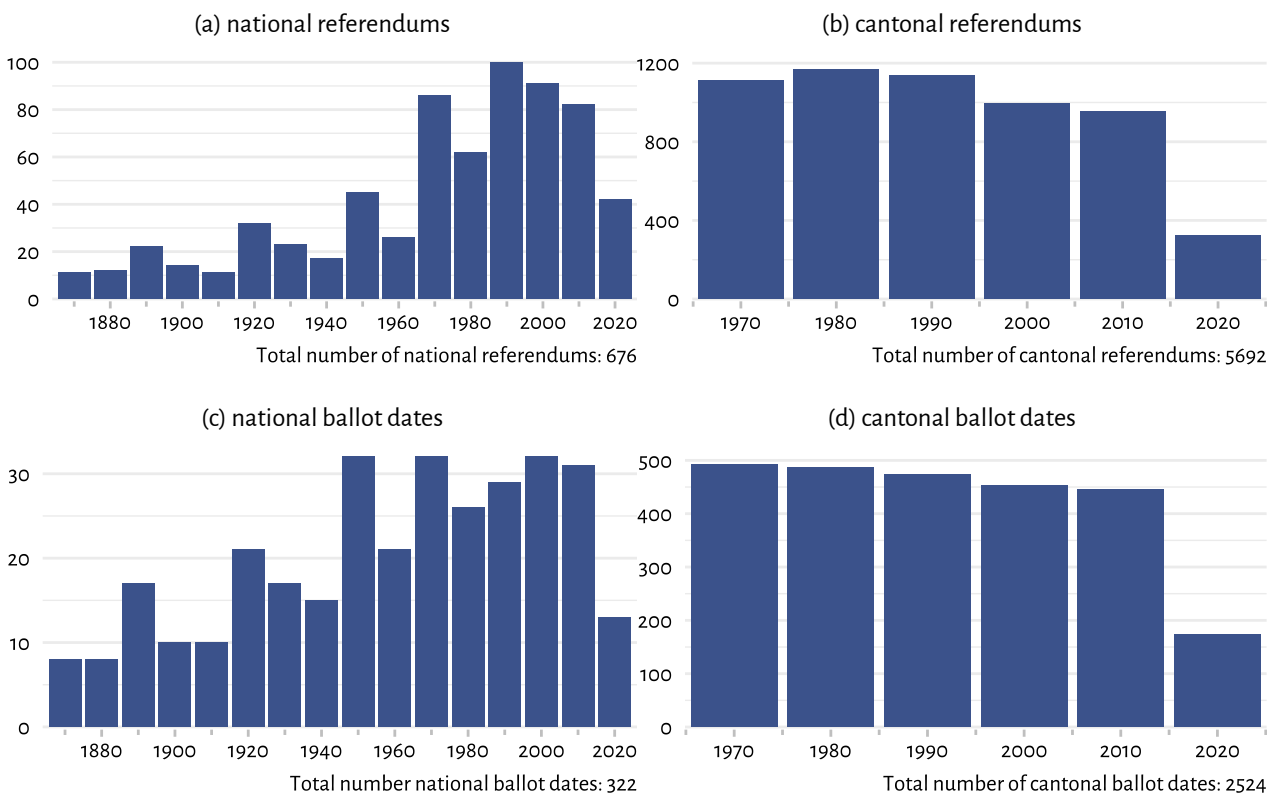


Figure 2.1 provides a detailed breakdown of the number of Swiss referendums and ballot dates per decade, categorized by the national and cantonal level.

- Figure 2.1a displays the trend of **national referendums** over time. The number of national referendums remained relatively low until after 1950, when there was a marked increase. This upward trend continued through the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Since then, the number of national referendums has declined somewhat. In total, around 670 referendums have been held at the national level since 1870.
- Figure 2.1b illustrates **cantonal referendums**. Data collection begins in 1970, peaking with nearly 1200 referendums during the 1980s. A gradual decrease can be seen after that. Nonetheless, cantonal referendums remain a significant part of Switzerland's political process, with a total of around 5700 referendums held since 1970.
- Figure 2.1c focuses on **national ballot dates**, which follow a similar trend to the national referendums. However, there does not seem to be a clear

peak. Rather, the first two decades of the 21st century still saw a considerable number of national direct democratic events, with over 30 ballot dates within this decade.

- Figure 2.1d highlights **cantonal ballot dates**. The data, available since 1970, shows that subnational ballot dates were most frequent around the 1970s and 1980s, with nearly 500 ballot dates per decade. However, a decline set in after these two decades, corresponding with the decrease in subnational referendums, although the reduction is attenuated.

Overall, Figure 2.1 demonstrates the strong role referendums play at both national and cantonal levels in Switzerland. However, a trend of declining activity has been observed at both levels. From 1970 onwards, the number of referendums decreased, particularly around the turn of the millennium. The current decade seems to have continued this trend with a nearly 40 % decrease in the number of votes within the first years compared to the decade before. There seems to be a comparable trend for ballot dates, although the decrease from the 1970s onward seems to be more gradual and less pronounced, meaning that the number of direct democratic proposals decreased stronger than the actual direct democratic events that accompany them.

2.2. A declining trend

Figure 2.2.: Relative number of national & cantonal referendums per year, compared to 1970 reference year (smoothed), 1970–2024

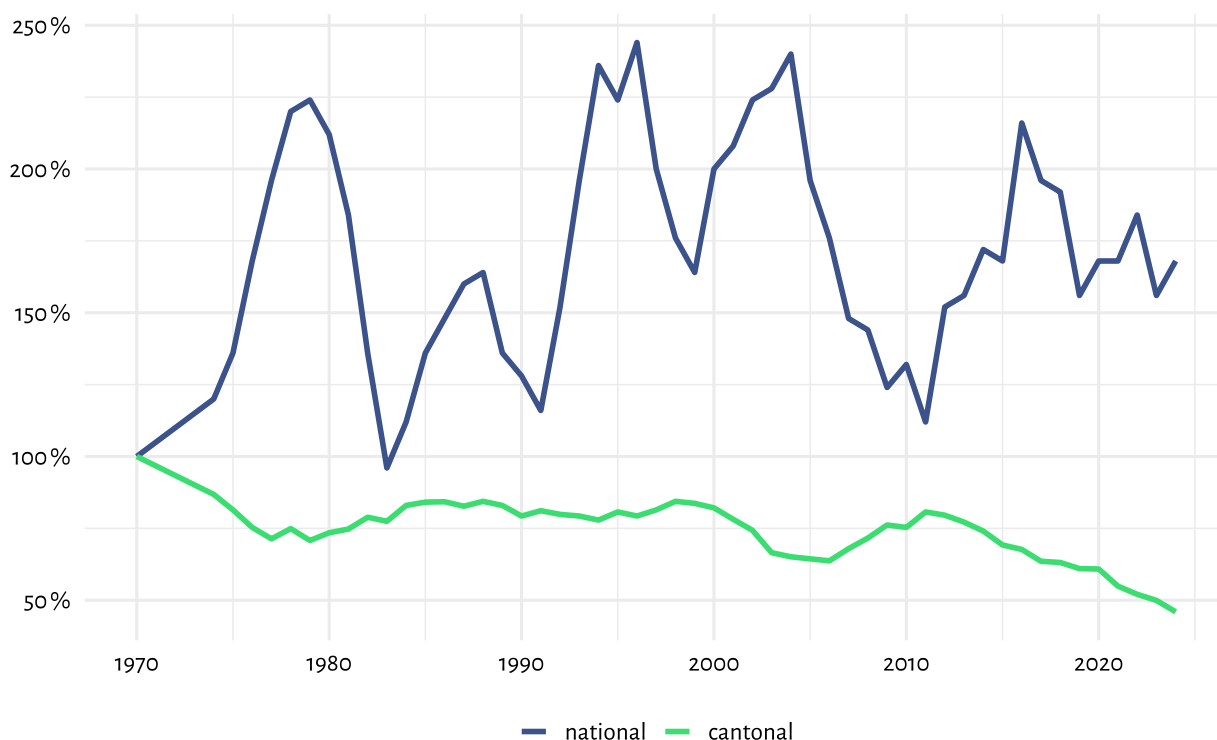


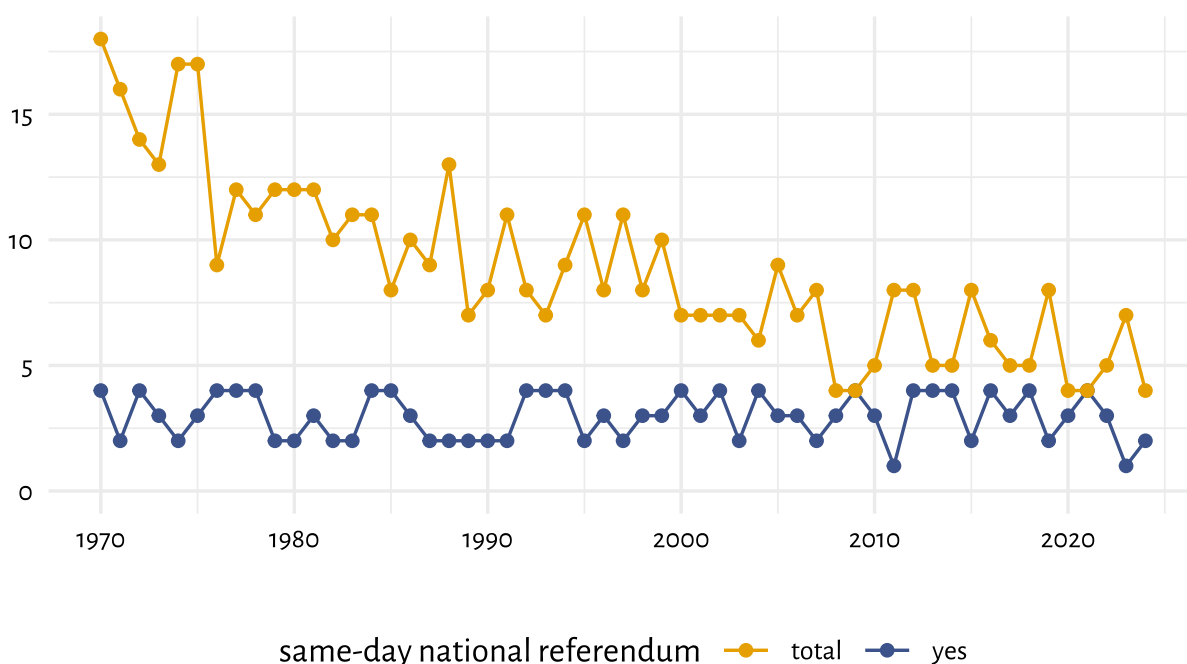
Figure 2.2 depicts the evolution of referendums at the national and subnational levels in Switzerland, with 1970 serving as the baseline year. In this graph, the number of referendum votes in 1970 is indexed to 100 %, and the lines

track how the count of referendums has changed over time relative to this baseline.

The blue line represents national referendums, while the green line shows cantonal referendums. The chart reveals that the national number of referendums is significantly more volatile than the subnational number. This higher volatility is largely due to the fact that the national line represents just one entity — Switzerland as a whole — so a year with few referendums (two, for example) causes sharp movements in the index. By contrast, the subnational number reflects the combined total of the Swiss cantons (excluding *Landsgemeinde* votes), which smoothes out the fluctuations, leading to a more stable trend line.

Particularly the subnational trend line shows a slight downward movement in the most recent years, indicating the decrease in the frequency of referendums relative to 1970 that was observed before. However, the overall patterns suggest that while national referendums are subject to more pronounced fluctuations, subnational referendums benefit from the aggregation of cantonal activity, leading to a greater overall stability.

Figure 2.3.: Number of cantonal ballot dates per year by same-day national referendum status, 1970–2024



When it comes to ballot dates, our data indicates a trend towards a homogenisation of voting dates. Whilst there are more dates with solely cantonal referendums in the 1970s and 1980s, most cantonal votes today seem to take place on the same day as national ones. Figure 2.3 confirms this trend, showing that the total number of ballot dates decreases over time, meaning that there are fewer cantonal ballot dates.

This could be related to the introduction of [postal voting](#). As postage costs are to be paid by the cantons, cantonal authorities might try to reduce the number of ballot dates as much as possible in order to save costs.

2.3. Cantonal trends and numbers

Figure 2.4.: Number of cantonal referendums per year (smoothed) by canton, 1970–2024

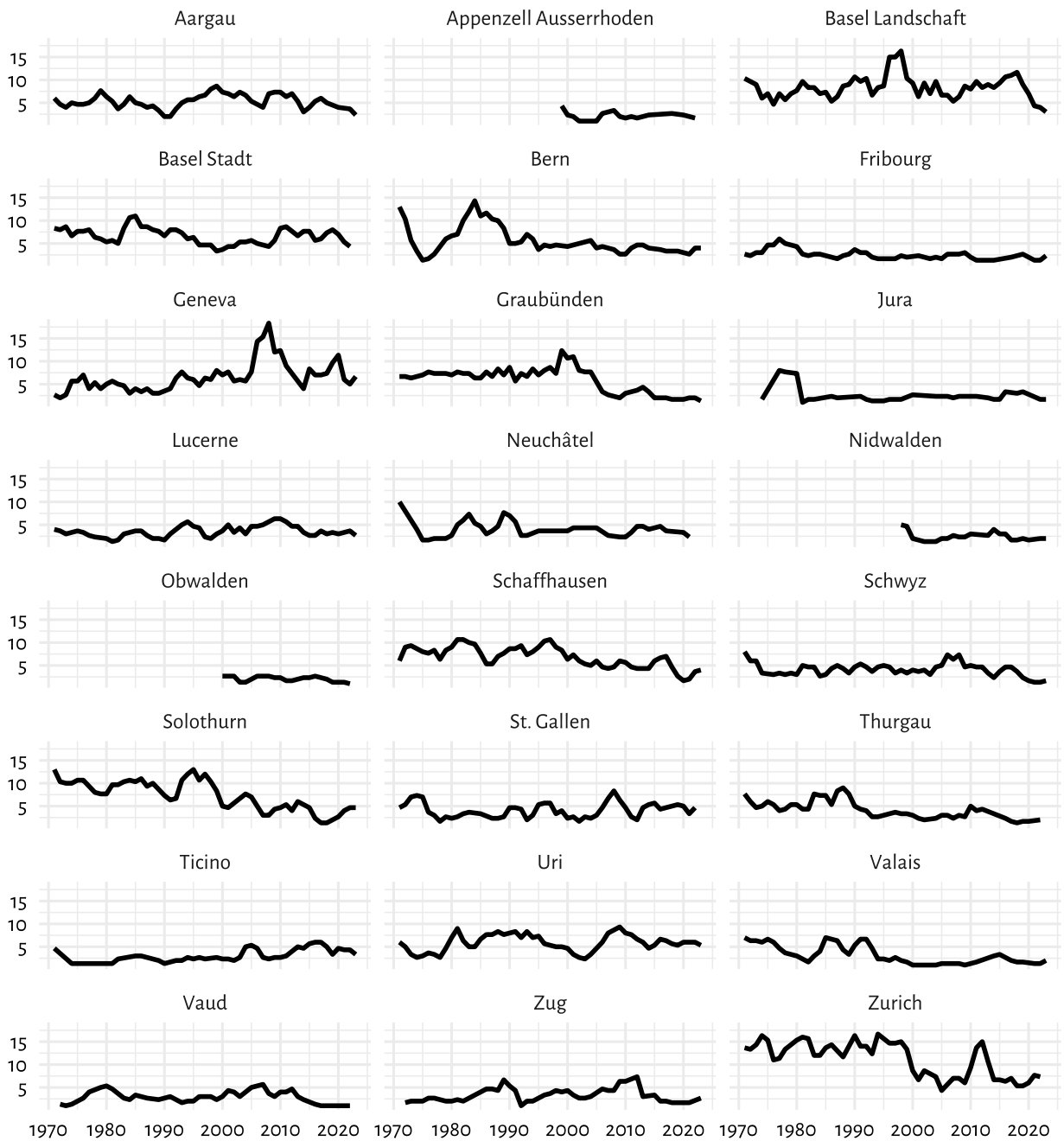
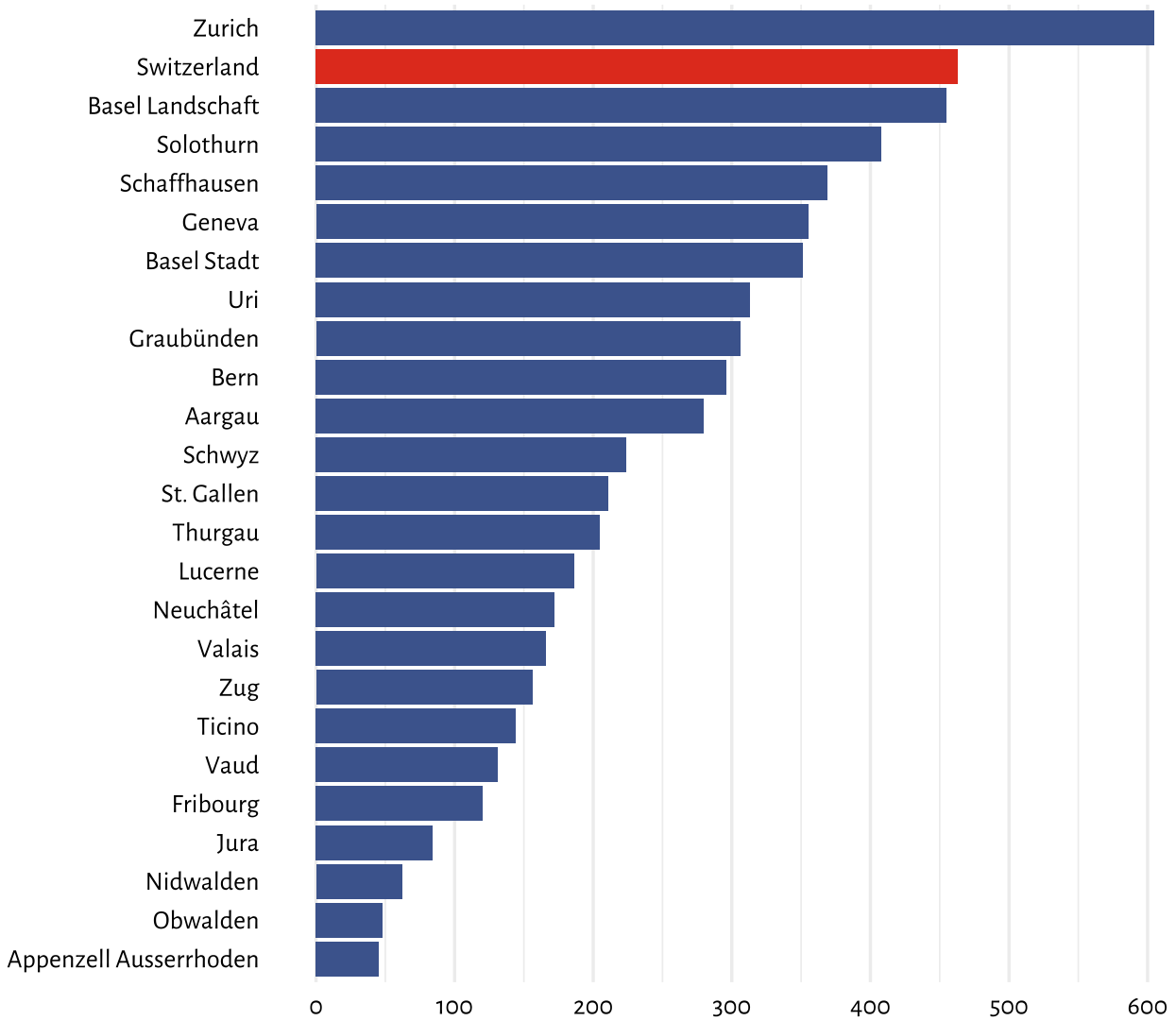


Figure 2.4 depicts the disaggregated components of the green line in Figure 2.2, i.e. the number of cantonal referendums per year across the Swiss cantons since 1970. This figure tracks absolute changes in the frequency of ballot dates over time in each canton. Some cantons see highly variable numbers of referendums each year, while others demonstrate more steady trends, indicating the varying political and legal dynamics at the cantonal level in Switzerland.

Figure 2.5.: Number of national & cantonal referendums by entity, 1970–2024



Total number of referendums in cantons and Switzerland: 6155

As Figure 2.5 shows, the canton with the most cantonal referendums since 1970 is Zurich, which is also the largest canton by population. Geneva is the only canton from the French-speaking part of Switzerland in the top-ten. This observation is nothing new, as previous studies found that direct democracy plays a larger role in the German-speaking part of Switzerland as the institutions are more developed there (Kriesi and Baglioni 2003, 7). Overall, it can be seen that with the exception of Zurich, the cantons held less referendums than the national level.

3. Types

3.1. National and cantonal referendum types

Figure 3.1.: Share of national & cantonal referendums by type, 1870–2024 (national) & 1970–2024 (cantonal)

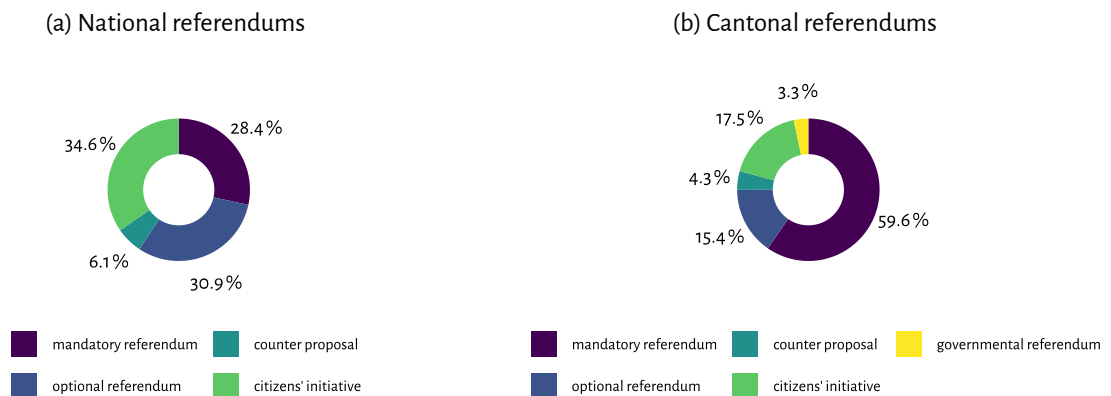


Figure 3.1 compares the proportion of different **types of referendums** at the national and subnational (cantonal) levels in Switzerland.

As can be seen in Figure 3.1a, **mandatory referendums** make up a significant share of national referendums, accounting for 28.4% of the total. **Optional referendums** are similarly prominent, constituting 30.9% of all national referendums. **Citizens' initiatives** make up 34.6%. The sizable share of the latter two categories reflect the active role of citizen-driven processes in Switzerland's direct democracy, despite their rather low acceptance rate (see Chapter 6). **Counter proposals** are less frequent, accounting for only 6.1%.

In comparison to the national level, the cantonal level shown in Figure 3.1b exhibits a very different pattern of referendum types. Dominating are **mandatory referendums**, which represent over half of all subnational referendums (59.6%), underscoring the centrality of constitutionally mandated issues at the cantonal level. **Citizens' initiatives** follow with 17.5%, while **optional referendums** represent 15.4%, showing that citizen-initiated processes are also an important part of cantonal democracy, although comparatively less so than on the national level. **Counter proposals** and **governmental referendums** represent smaller shares, with 4.3% and 3.3% respectively.

These charts highlight the differences between national and subnational referendums. Nationally, optional referendums and citizens' initiatives are more common, while at the cantonal level, mandatory referendums are more dominant. However, as seen before, there is variance between cantons on several dimensions. This only shows an overall picture of referendums at the cantonal level and should not be used to make inferences about individual cantons.

3.2. Cantonal type variations

Figure 3.2.: Share of cantonal referendums by type & canton, 1970–2024



Figure 3.2 depicts the different types of referendums by canton. The distribution is very diverse across the cantons. However, mandatory referendums constitute the largest part of referendums in all cantons, except Nidwalden and Vaud (where citizens' initiatives dominate) and Basel Stadt and Ticino (where optional referendums constitute the largest share).

3.3. Trend of types

Figure 3.3.: Relative number of cantonal referendums per year by type, compared to 1970 reference year (smoothed), 1970–2024

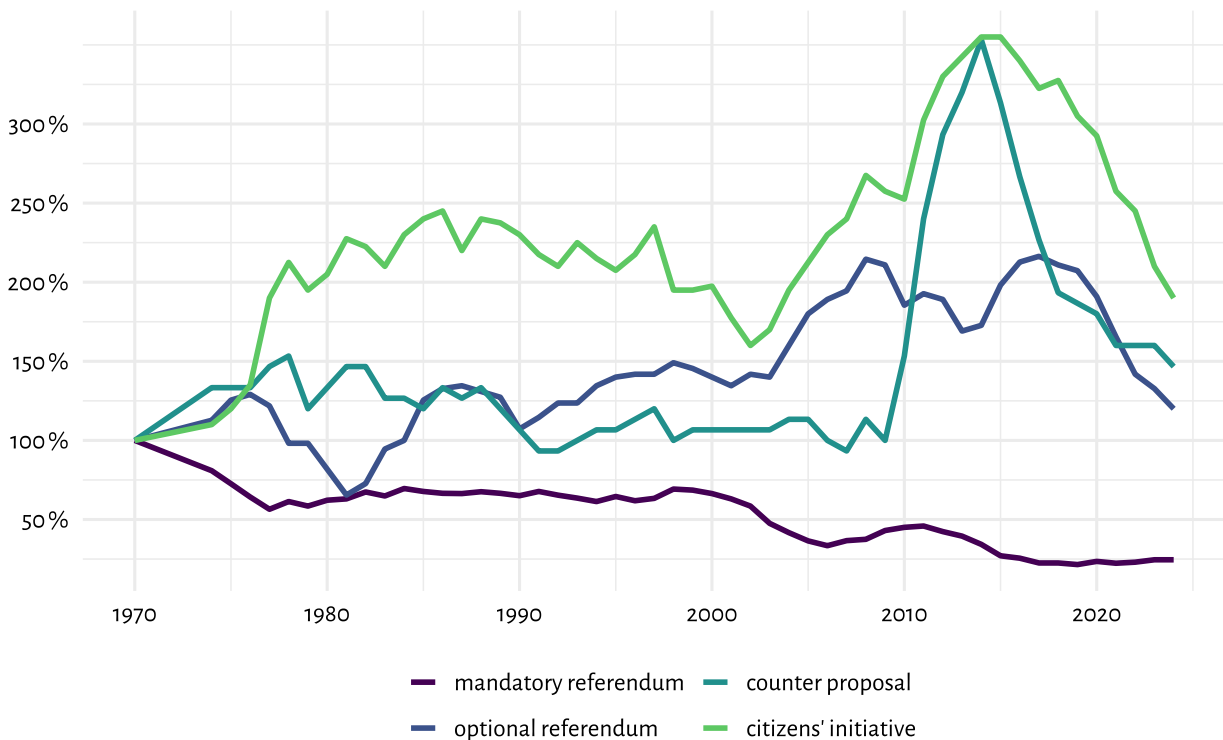


Figure 3.3 illustrates the relative frequency of cantonal referendums per year (smoothed), categorized by type and indexed to the year 1970. Over the observed period from 1970 to 2024, **mandatory referendums** have consistently remained below their 1970 baseline, reflecting a relative decline in use. As they constitute the majority of referendums, their decline led to the overall decrease in the number of cantonal referendums seen in Chapter 2.

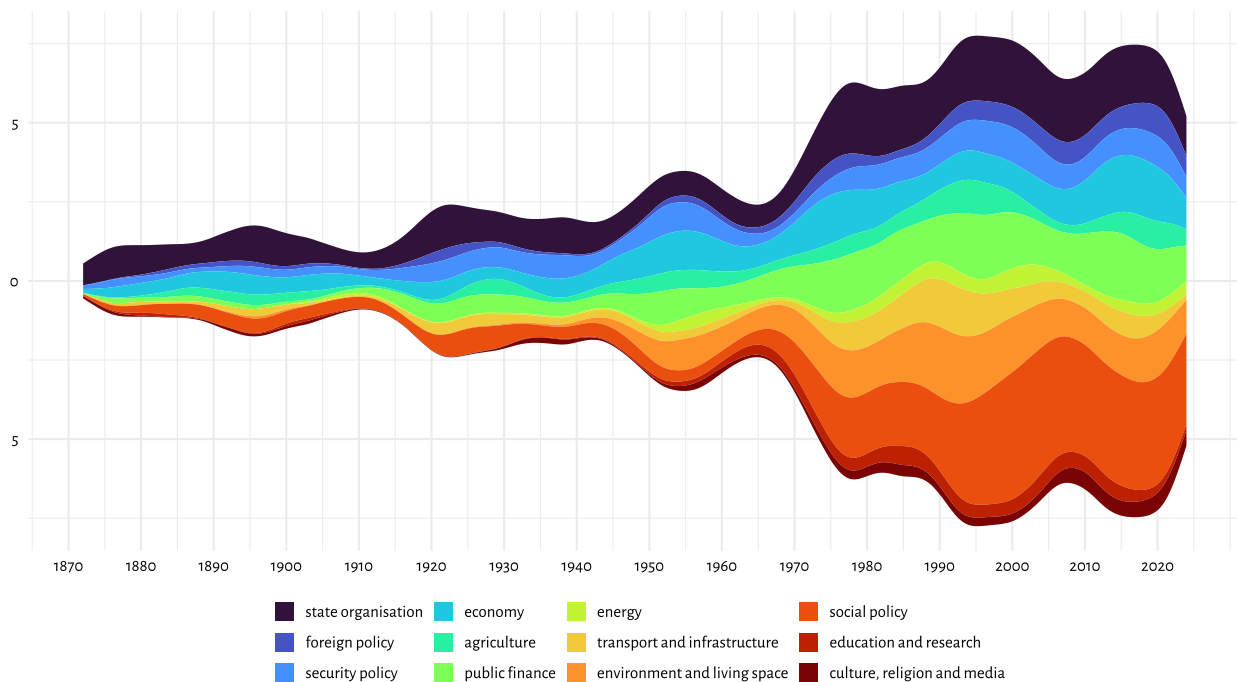
Optional referendums and **counter proposals** show moderate overall increases compared to 1970, especially from the 2000s onward, peaking in the 2010s before tapering off.

Citizens' initiatives have experienced the most significant rise, peaking sharply in the 2010s, with their activity dropping significantly since then but still hovering over the 1970 baseline. This suggests a growing but fluctuating emphasis on participatory mechanisms like citizens' initiatives and counterproposals in cantonal politics, while mandatory referendums appear to have become less central over time.

4. Political topics

4.1. National topic variation over time

Figure 4.1.: Share of national referendums by topic, 1870–2024



Referendum **topics** range across a wide array of policy areas, reflecting the diverse concerns of Swiss voters. By analyzing trends over time, we can see how certain issues vary significantly in importance depending on the canton and time period. Figure 4.1 illustrates the evolution of topics covered in Swiss national referendums from 1870 to the present. Each colored band represents a different policy area, with the width of the band corresponding to the number of referendums on that topic relative to other topics during a given time period.

In the early years, referendum topics were relatively limited and infrequent, represented by the narrow bands. Over time, as Swiss direct democracy became more institutionalized, the number of referendums increased, and the variety of topics expanded significantly, especially in the second half of the 20th century. The two topics with the steepest ascendance are the **environment and living space** and the **energy** topic, which were factually non-existent before the 1930s and came into focus after that period, aligning with the global rise of environmental and energy concerns.

4.2. Cantonal topic variation

Figure 4.2.: Share of cantonal referendums by topic and canton, 1970–2024

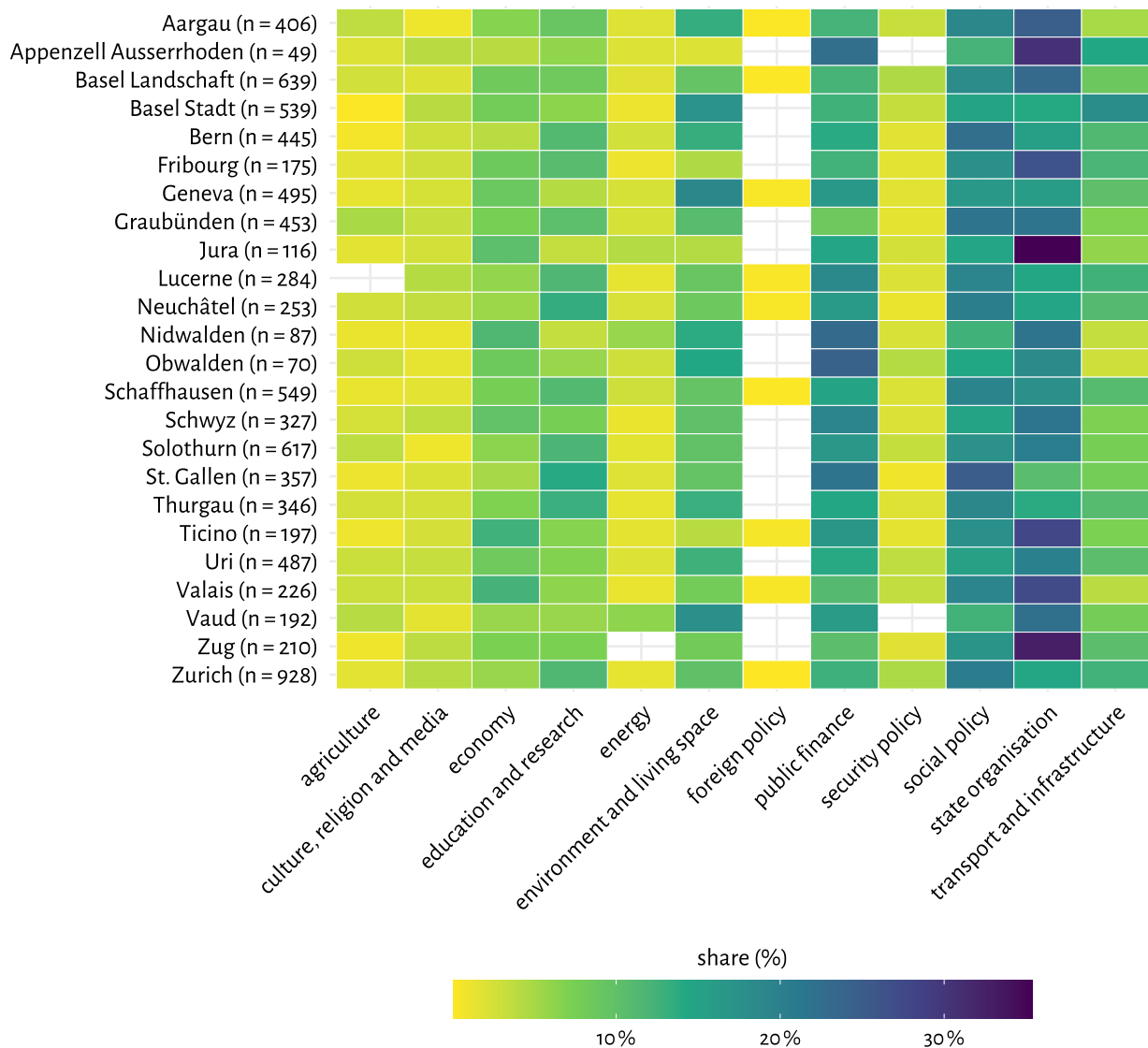


Figure 4.2 shows the distribution of referendum topics across various cantons. Each row represents a canton, while the columns correspond to specific topics. The intensity of the color indicates the relative frequency of referendums on a given topic in a canton, with darker colors representing higher frequencies.

Referendum votes on **public finance**, **social policy**, and **state organization** constitute a prominent fraction of total referendums across most cantons. This suggests that these issues are central to the political discourse in most cantons and frequently put to a referendum. In contrast, topics such as **agriculture**, **culture, religion, and media**, and **security policy** tend to be less frequently addressed in referendums at the cantonal level. Referendums on **foreign policy** are often non-existent on the cantonal level, as international affairs usually fall into the jurisdiction of governments on the national level. In addition, Luzern never had a referendum on agriculture, the people of Zug never voted on a cantonal energy proposal, and Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Vaud have not held a referendum on security policy.

5. Turnout

5.1. National and cantonal turnout over time

Figure 5.1.: Turnout in national & cantonal referendums by decade, 1870–2024 (national) & 1970–2024 (cantonal)

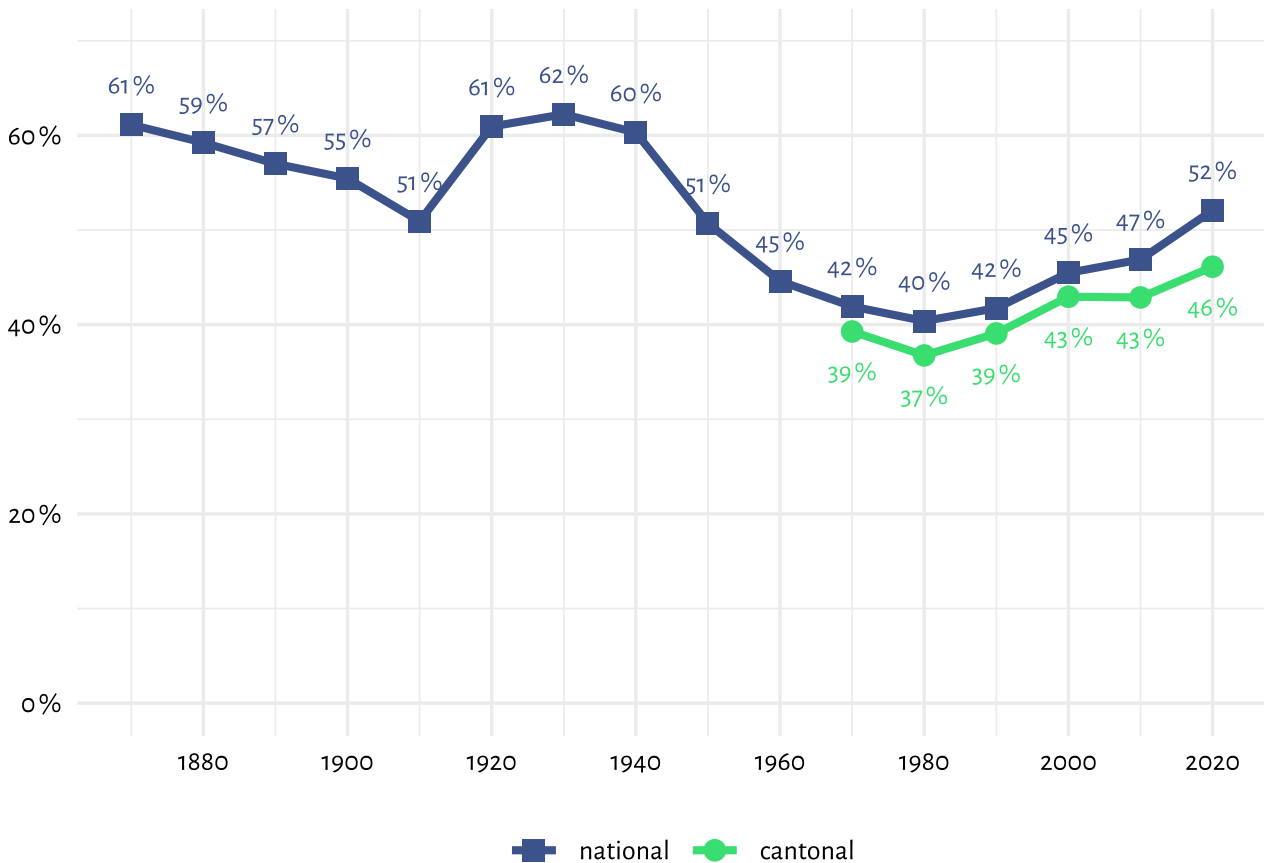


Figure 5.1 illustrates voter turnout in national referendums by decade since 1900. The graph reveals significant fluctuations in turnout rates over time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, turnout was relatively high, starting at around 55 % but declining slightly to about 50 % by the 1920s. There is a notable increase in turnout through the 1920s and 1940s, peaking at over 60 % around 1930. This could potentially be the result of heightened political engagement during the interwar period and World War II.

After the 1940s, turnout steeply declined, reaching its lowest point in the 1980s at around 40 %. While it is not clear where this drop stems from, it could be attributed to various factors, including political disengagement or a reduction in contentious referendum issues during that time.

Following this low point, turnout has been slowly increasing since the 1980s, and by the 2010s, it had recovered to levels over 50 %. This recent upward trend

may reflect renewed political interest as a result of more topic diversity in referendums (see Chapter 4).

Figure 5.1 also illustrates voter turnout in cantonal referendums by decade, starting from 1970. The graph shows an upward trend in voter engagement over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, turnout was relatively low, hovering around 35–40 %, reflecting a period of lower political participation at the cantonal level. From the 1980s onwards, turnout started to increase steadily. By the 2000s, it rose above 40 %, and in the first year of the 2020s, it surpassed 45 %, indicating a significant rise in political engagement at the cantonal level over the past few decades.

This steady increase suggests growing voter interest and participation in cantonal referendums, potentially driven by more salient issues being put to vote at the cantonal level in recent years. Interestingly, it coincides with the decrease in the number of referendums, which could indicate a possible increase in voter engagement when referendums are scarcer. The rising trend also highlights the general importance of subnational governance in Swiss political life.

5.2. Cantonal turnout

Figure 5.2.: Turnout in cantonal referendums by canton, 1970–2024

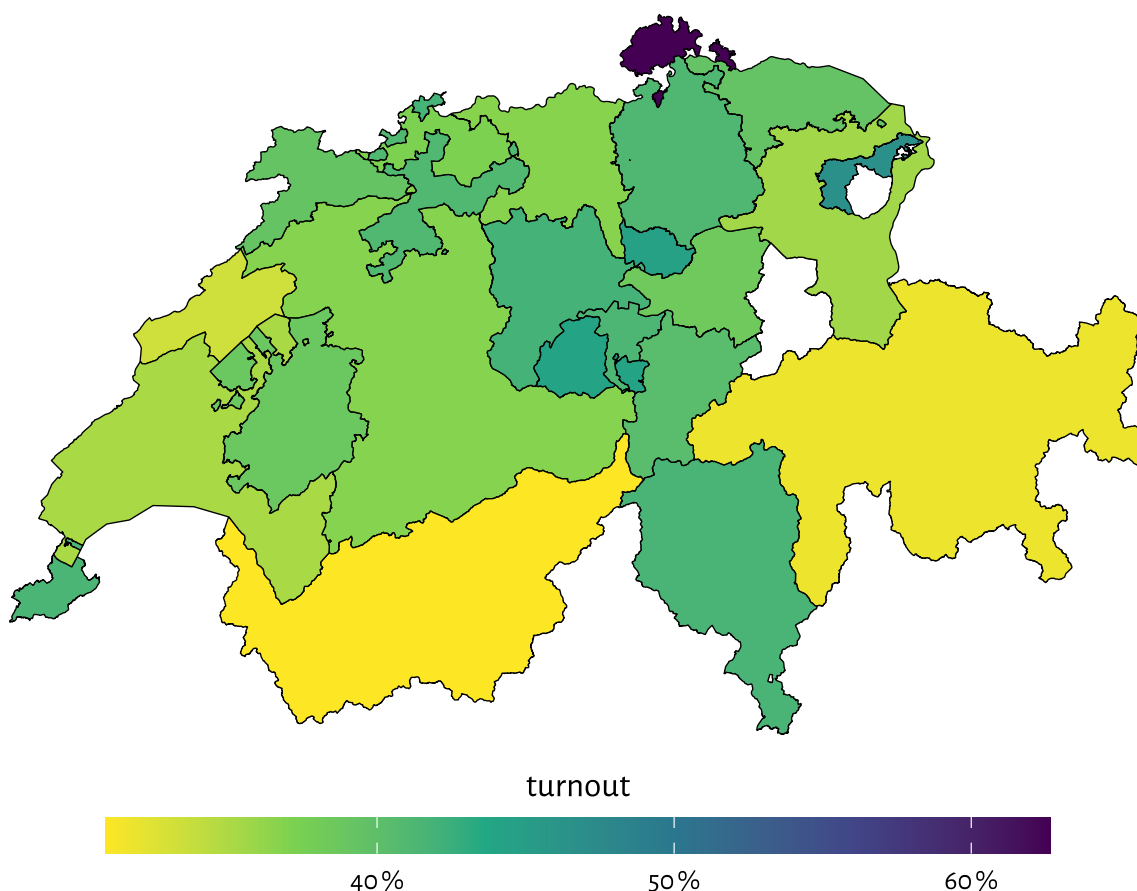


Figure 5.2 presents a map of Switzerland illustrating the average voter turnout in cantonal referendums from 1970 onwards. The highest turnout rates by far are found in Schaffhausen (62.6%), where turnout is traditionally high, due to

voting being mandated by Chapter 3 of the Cantonal Constitution (Swiss Confederation 2021). All other cantons lie within the range of 30.9% (Valais) and 46.7% (Appenzell Ausserrhoden). This suggests a moderate level of participation across much of the country.

5.3. Turnout by type

Figure 5.3.: Turnout in national & cantonal referendums by type, 1970–2024

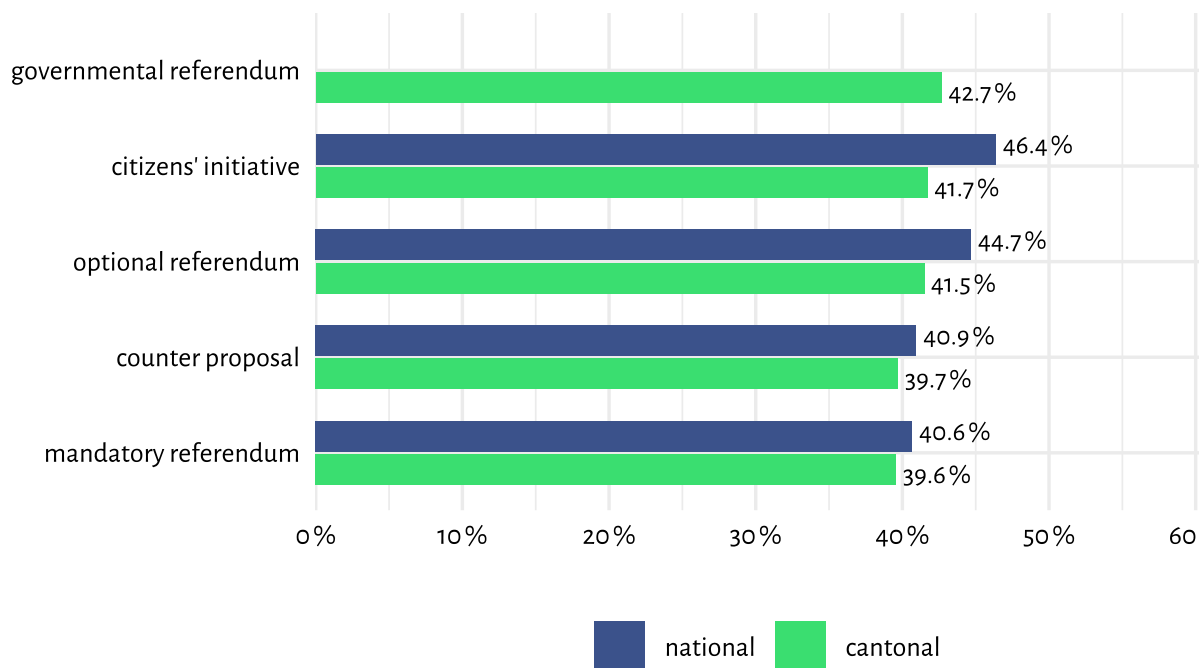
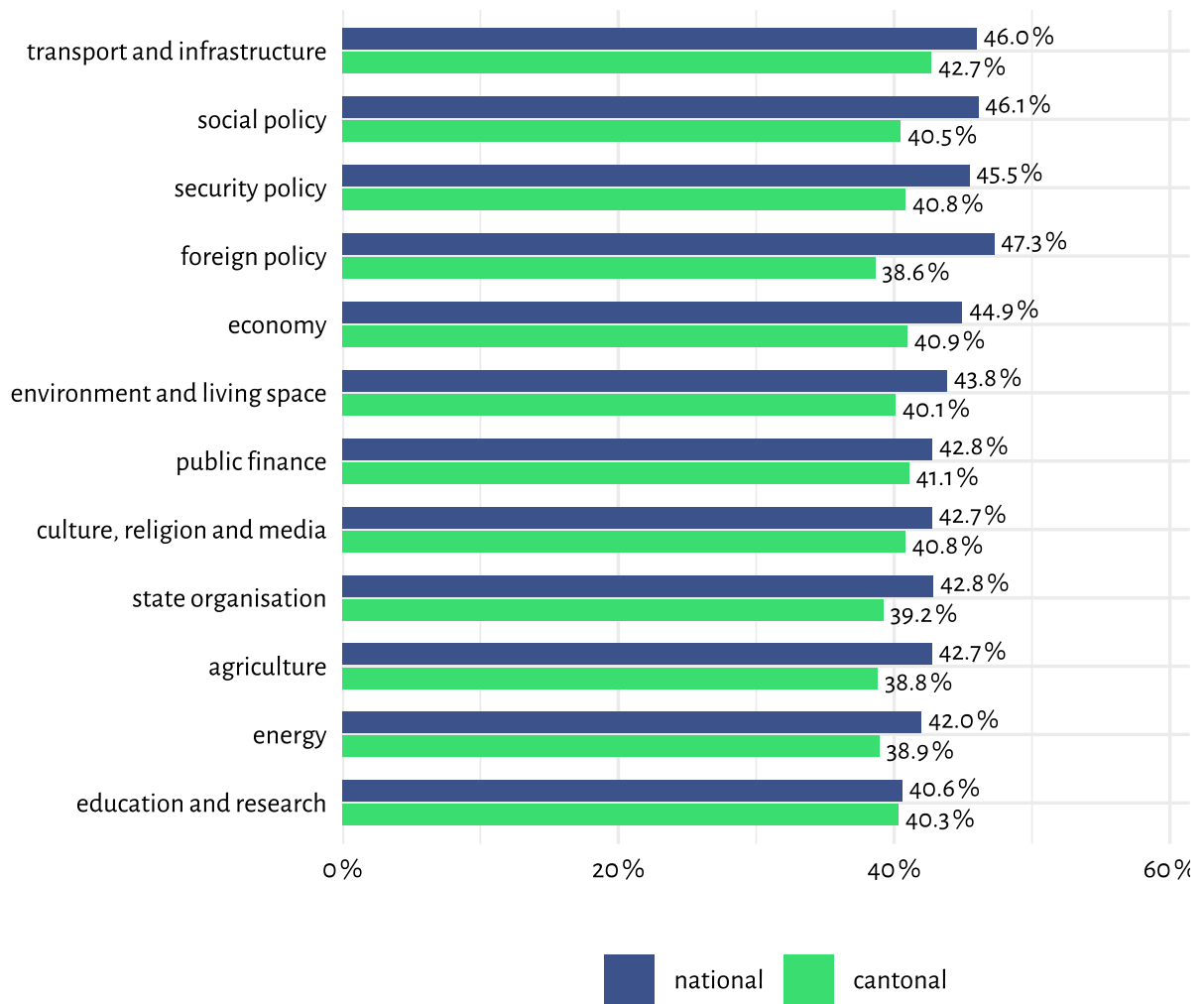


Figure 5.3 depicts the turnout rates by referendum type in referendums at the national and subnational level. As can be seen, the turnout rates are around 40 % for cantonal referendums and a bit higher for national referendums. The turnout rates do not vary much across referendum types, which is probably because oftentimes, referendums of different types are held on the same ballot date.

5.4. Turnout by topic

Figure 5.4.: Turnout in national & cantonal referendums by topic, 1970–2024



As can be seen in Figure 5.4, the turnout also does not vary significantly between different topics. This indicates that the electorate is not necessarily more interested in certain subjects. In addition, referendums with different topics are oftentimes held on the same ballot date.

5.5. Turnout with same-day national referendum

Figure 5.5.: Turnout in cantonal referendums by same-day national referendum status, 1970–2024

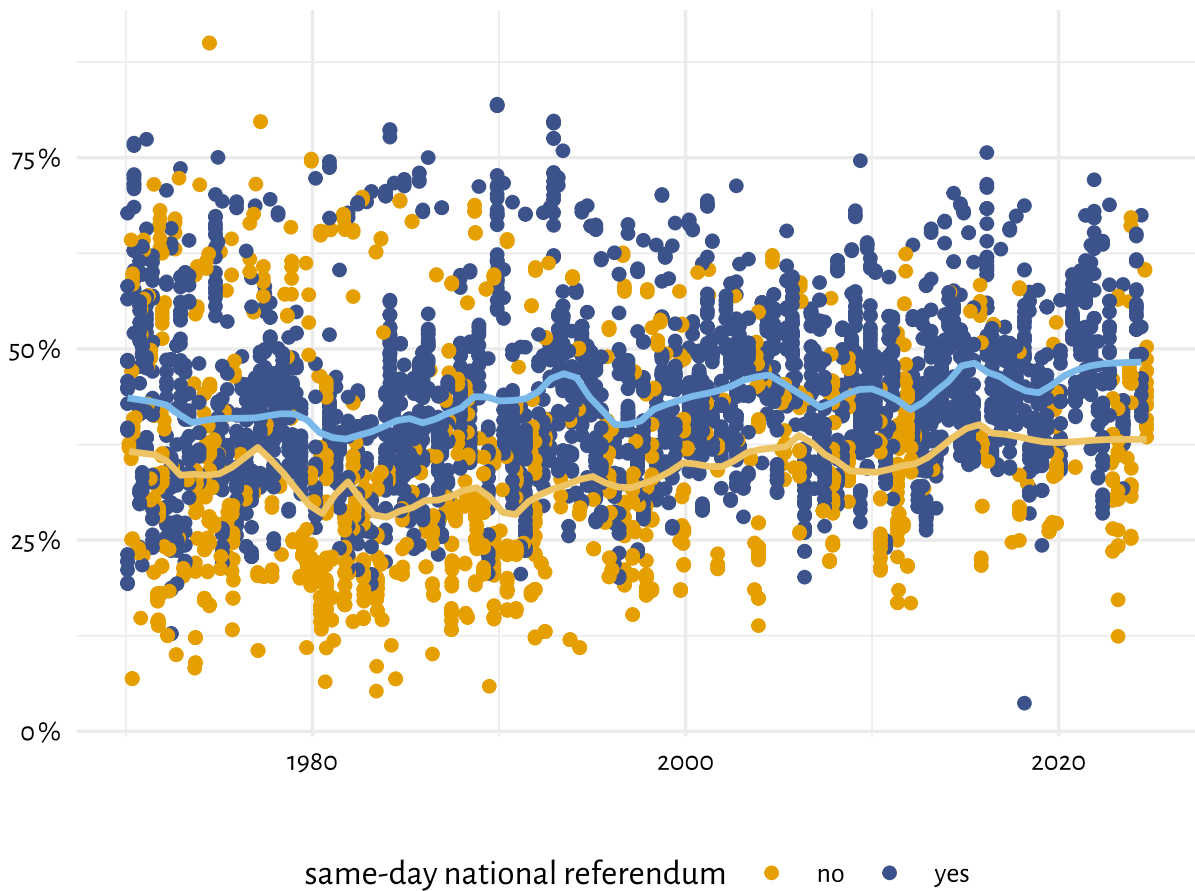


Figure 5.5 shows the turnout rate for every cantonal referendum since 1970. When distinguishing between cantonal referendums that took place on the same day as a national referendum and those that did not, we find a significant difference between the turnout rates. National referendums seem to be a driving force for participation in cantonal referendums. Our data showcases that the turnout rates in cantonal referendums with same-day national referendums have been consistently higher since 1970. However, further analyses needs to be carried out in order to determine whether same-day national referendums are the main explanatory factor behind the higher turnout.

6. Outcome

6.1. National and cantonal acceptance rate by type

Figure 6.1.: Acceptance rate of national & cantonal referendums by type, 1970–2024

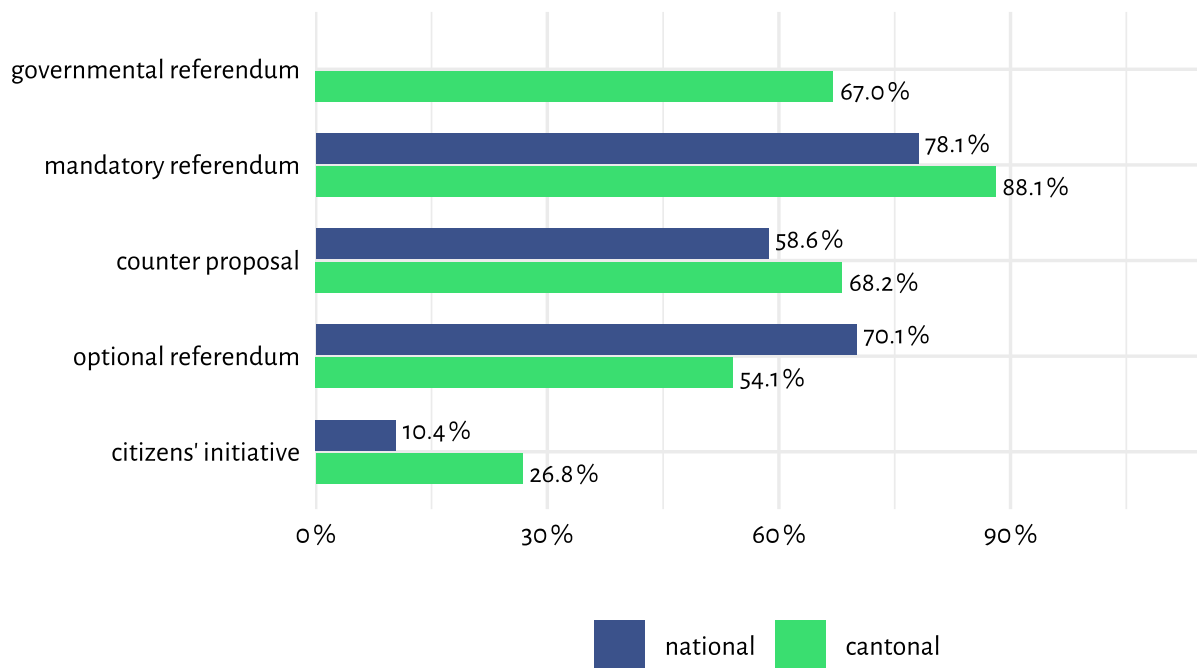


Figure 6.1 provides an analysis of the acceptance rates of referendums based on the national and subnational level (from 1970 onwards). The acceptance rate is defined as the number of accepted referendums as a percentage of all referendums.

The blue bars display the acceptance rates for the different types of referendums on the national level. **Mandatory referendums** have a very high acceptance rate of 78.1%, reflecting the generally broad support for referendums that are required by law, such as constitutional changes. **Optional referendums**, which allow citizens to demand a vote on a law passed by the government, were accepted 70.1% of the time. **Counter proposals** have an average acceptance rate of 58.6%, suggesting that voters tend to approve a majority of these alternatives to citizen-initiated referendums. The by far lowest acceptance rate is seen in **citizens' initiatives**, with only 10.4% of the initiatives passing, highlighting the difficulty citizens face in getting their proposals accepted by the wider electorate.

The green bars focus on acceptance rates on the subnational level. The distribution is similar to the national level, with **mandatory referendums** showing the highest acceptance rate at 88.1%, indicating strong support for proposals required by cantonal law. **Counter proposals**, which present alternatives to

initiatives, are also widely accepted with a rate of 68.2%. **Governmental referendums** have an acceptance rate of 67.0%, slightly below **counter proposals**. **Optional referendums** see a lower acceptance rate of 54.1%, suggesting a more divided response when subnational governments' decisions are challenged by particular groups of the electorate. Lastly, **citizens' initiatives**, as at the national level, have a very low acceptance rate at 26.8%, although this is still higher than at the national level.

While the direct democratic system of Switzerland allows citizens to engage with the political system, hurdles remain fairly high for citizen-initiated proposals to actually pass, particularly at the national level.

6.2. Acceptance rate in cantons and by type

Figure 6.2.: Acceptance rate of cantonal referendums by canton, 1970–2024

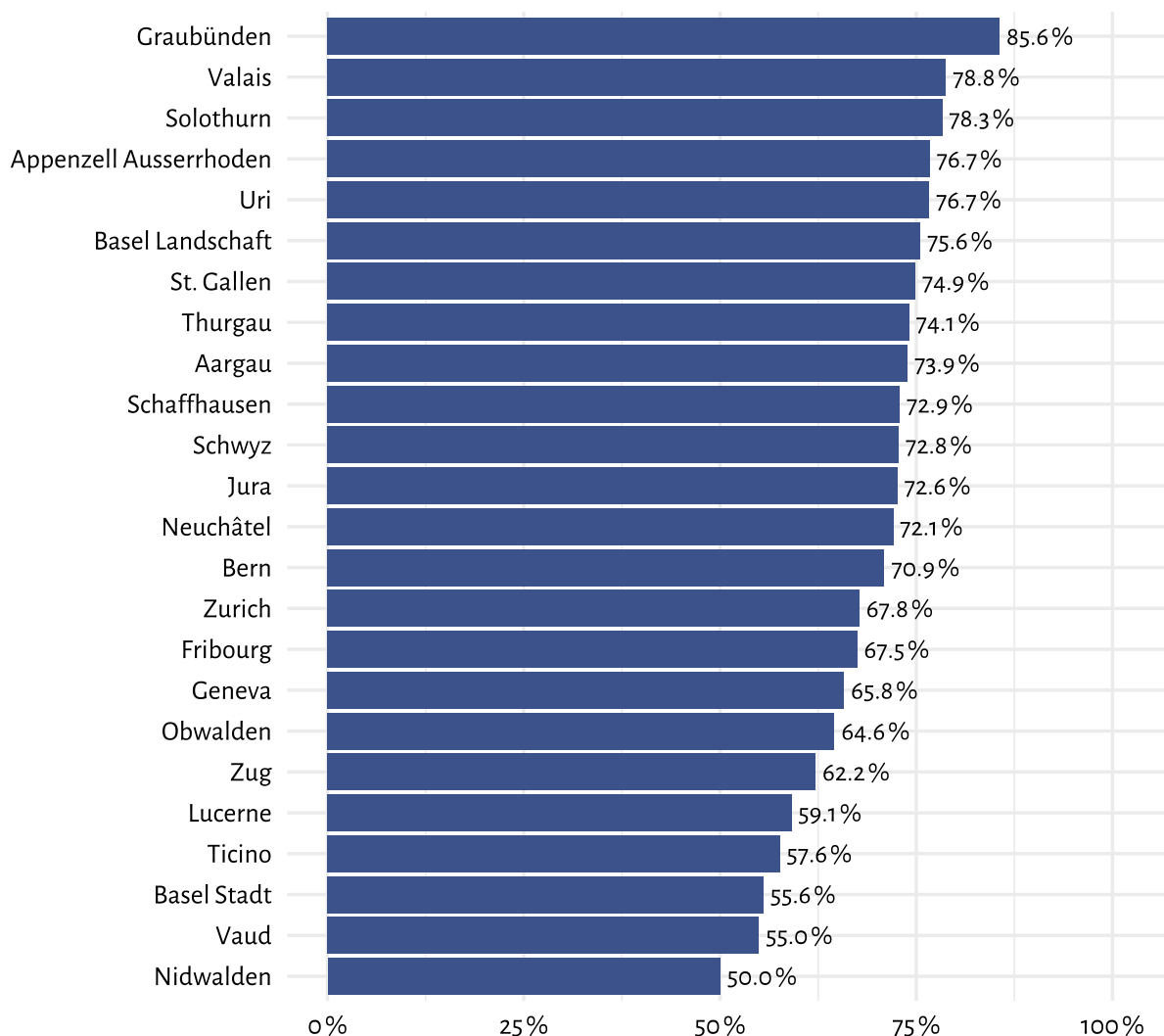


Figure 6.2 presents the acceptance rates of cantonal referendums across various Swiss cantons. We assume a strong relationship between the types of referendums that are voted on in a canton (see Figure 4.2) and the acceptance rate.

The canton with the highest acceptance rate is Graubünden, where 85.6% of cantonal referendums were accepted, followed by Valais with 78.8%. These cantons show a high level of voter approval for referendums, suggesting strong alignment between the issues brought to vote and voter preferences in these regions.

At the lower end of the spectrum, Nidwalden has the lowest acceptance rate at 50.0%, meaning that over half of the referendums were rejected. Other cantons with relatively low acceptance rates include Vaud (55.0%), Basel Stadt (55.6%), and Ticino (57.6%), indicating a higher level of voter skepticism or disagreement with referendum proposals in these areas.

Figure 6.3.: Acceptance rate of cantonal referendums by canton & type, 1970–2024

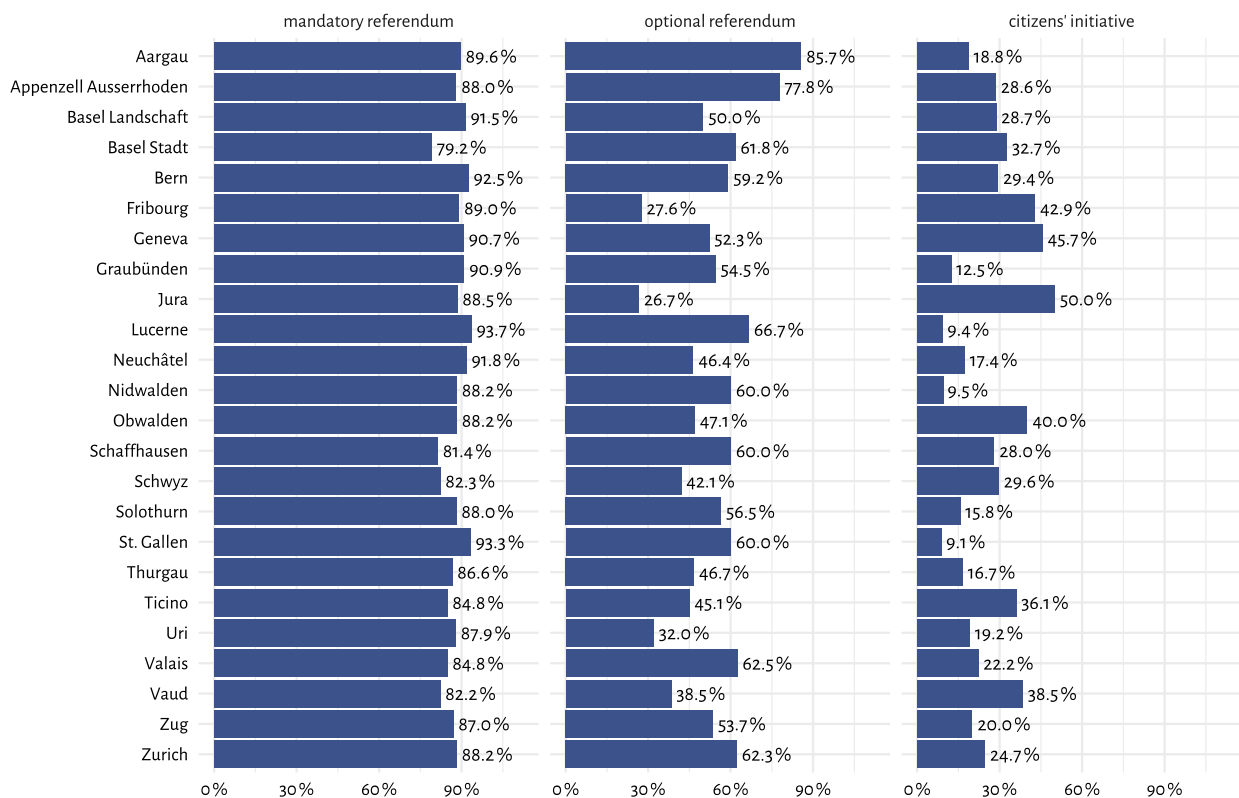


Figure 6.3 depicts the cantons' acceptance rates categorized by different referendum type. It is visible that **mandatory referendums** have a very high acceptance rate across all cantons. The variation is much larger for **optional referendums**, where the acceptance rate ranges from 26.7% (Jura) up to 85.7% (Aargau). For **citizens' initiatives**, it is visible that the acceptance rate is low for nearly all cantons, with the exceptions of Fribourg (42.9%), Geneva (45.7%), and Jura (50.0%). Overall, it is important to note that the differences in acceptance rates between cantons cannot only be explained through the use of different types of referendums. There are also important variations in acceptance rates for the same referendum types, requiring further investigation.

6.3. Acceptance rate by topic

Figure 6.4.: Acceptance rate of national referendums by topic, 1870–2024

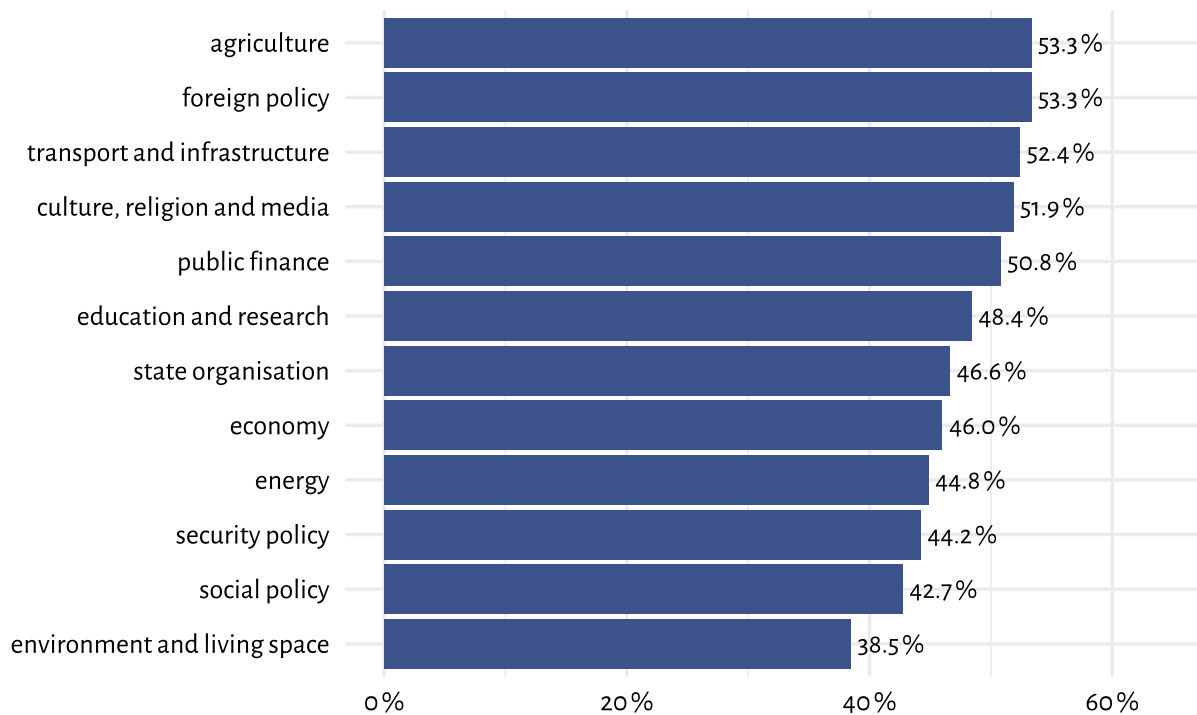


Figure 6.4 illustrates the acceptance rate of national referendums in Switzerland, broken down by topic. The highest acceptance rates are found in referendums about **agriculture** and **foreign policy**, both with an approval rate of 53.3%, suggesting that referendums in these areas are relatively more successful in gaining voter support compared to other topics. Similarly, referendums related to **transport and infrastructure** and **culture, religion and media** also have relatively high acceptance rates of 52.4% and 51.9%, respectively. In contrast, referendums concerning **environment and living space** have the lowest acceptance rate at 38.5%, indicating that voters are more hesitant to approve initiatives in this area. Other topics with lower approval rates include **energy** (44.8%), **security policy** (44.2%), and **social policy** (42.7%).

Overall, the distribution highlights varying voter preferences across different policy areas in Switzerland's direct democratic system. However, the question arises whether the underlying differences are due to the topics themselves, or if they are more related to the types of referendums.

6.4. Acceptance rate by topic and type

Figure 6.5.: Acceptance rate of national referendums by topic & type, 1870–2024

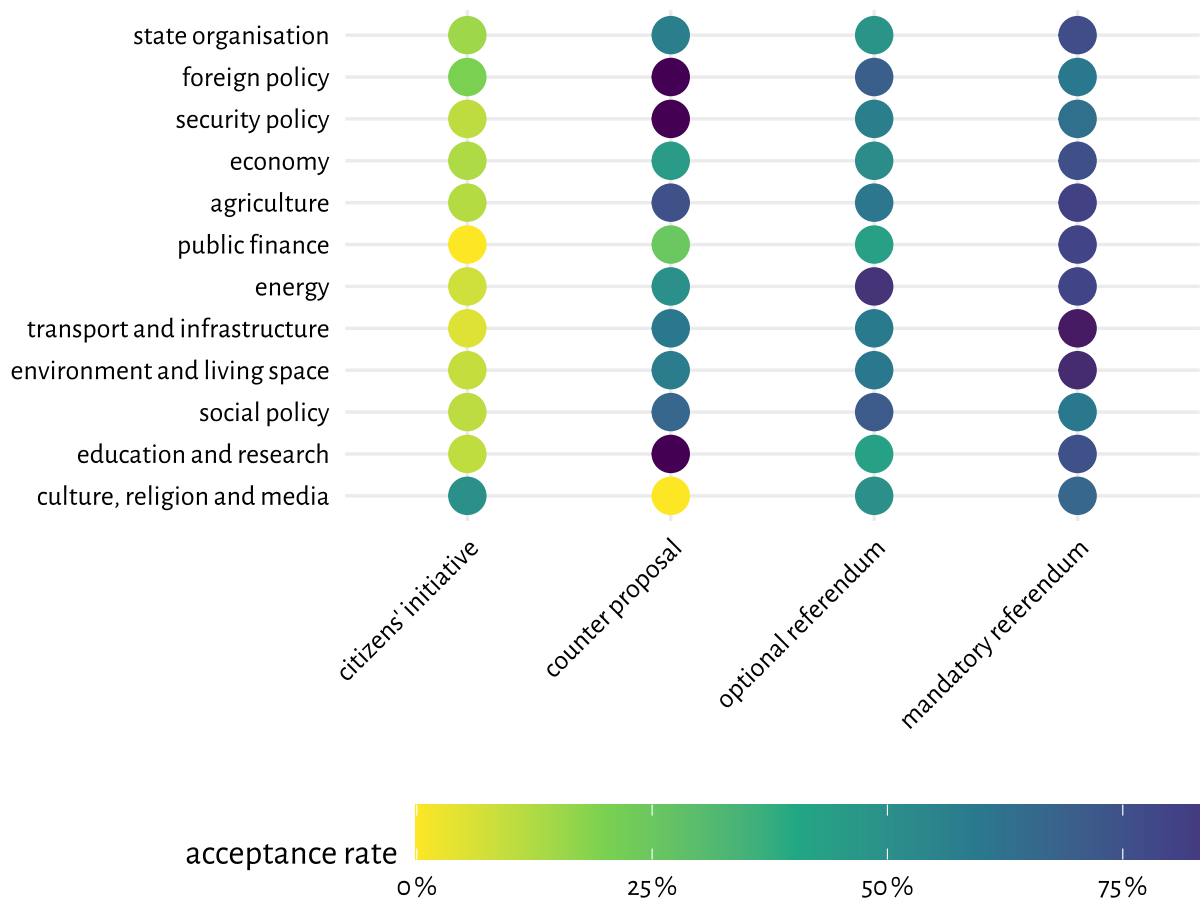


Figure 6.5 displays the acceptance rate by topic and type. It is visible that it is rather the referendum types that influence the acceptance rate rather than the topics. **Citizens' initiatives** for example tend to have low acceptance rates across almost all topics, while **mandatory referendums** seem to be rather highly accepted, irrespective of policy area. At the same time, there is a wide intra-topic variation for most topics, indicating that the topic alone does not determine or predict how many voters will approve of the measure.

7. Congruence of citizens and government

7.1. Success of Federal Council

Figure 7.1.: Success rate of Federal Council in national referendums per legislative period, 1971–2024

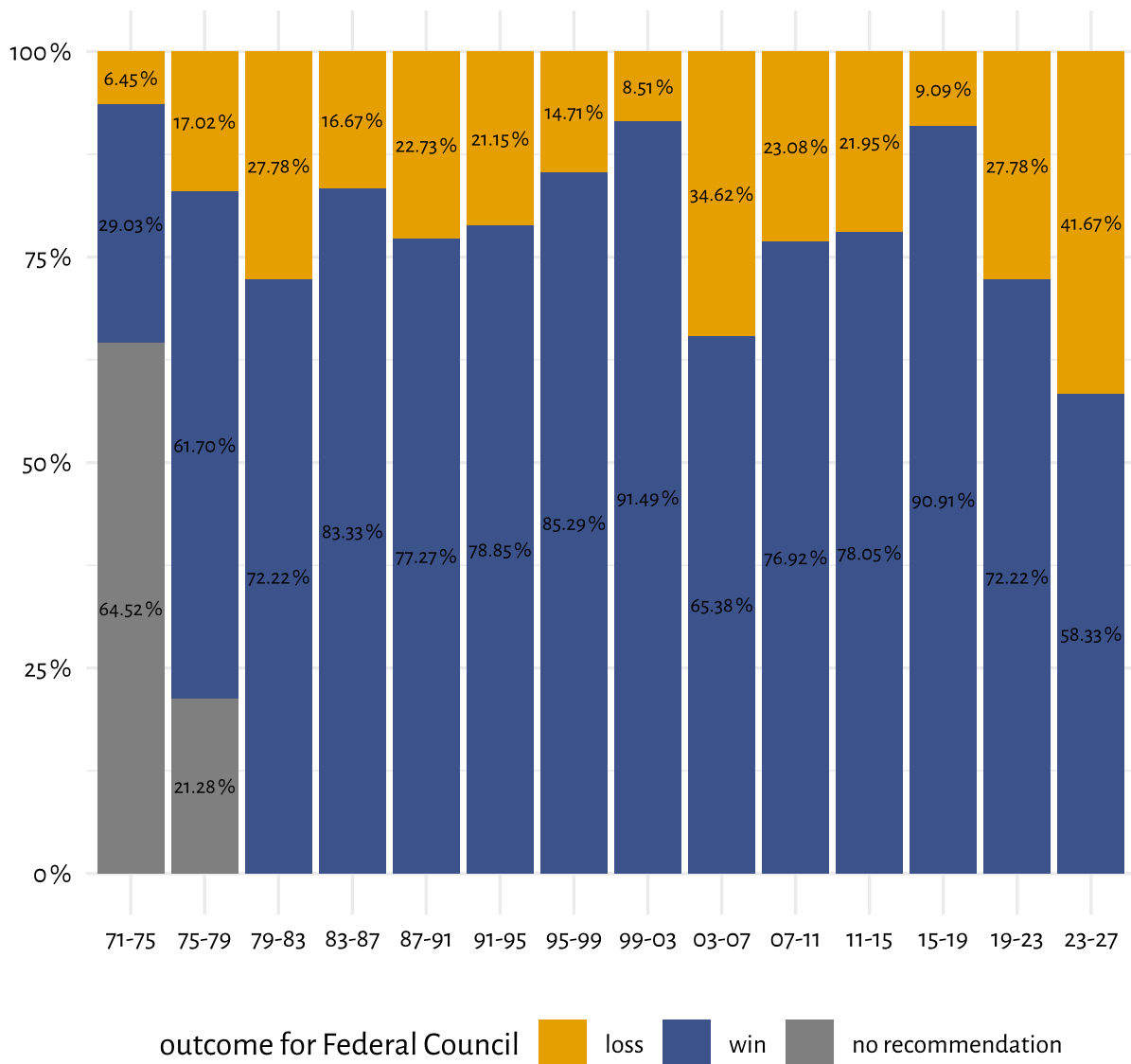
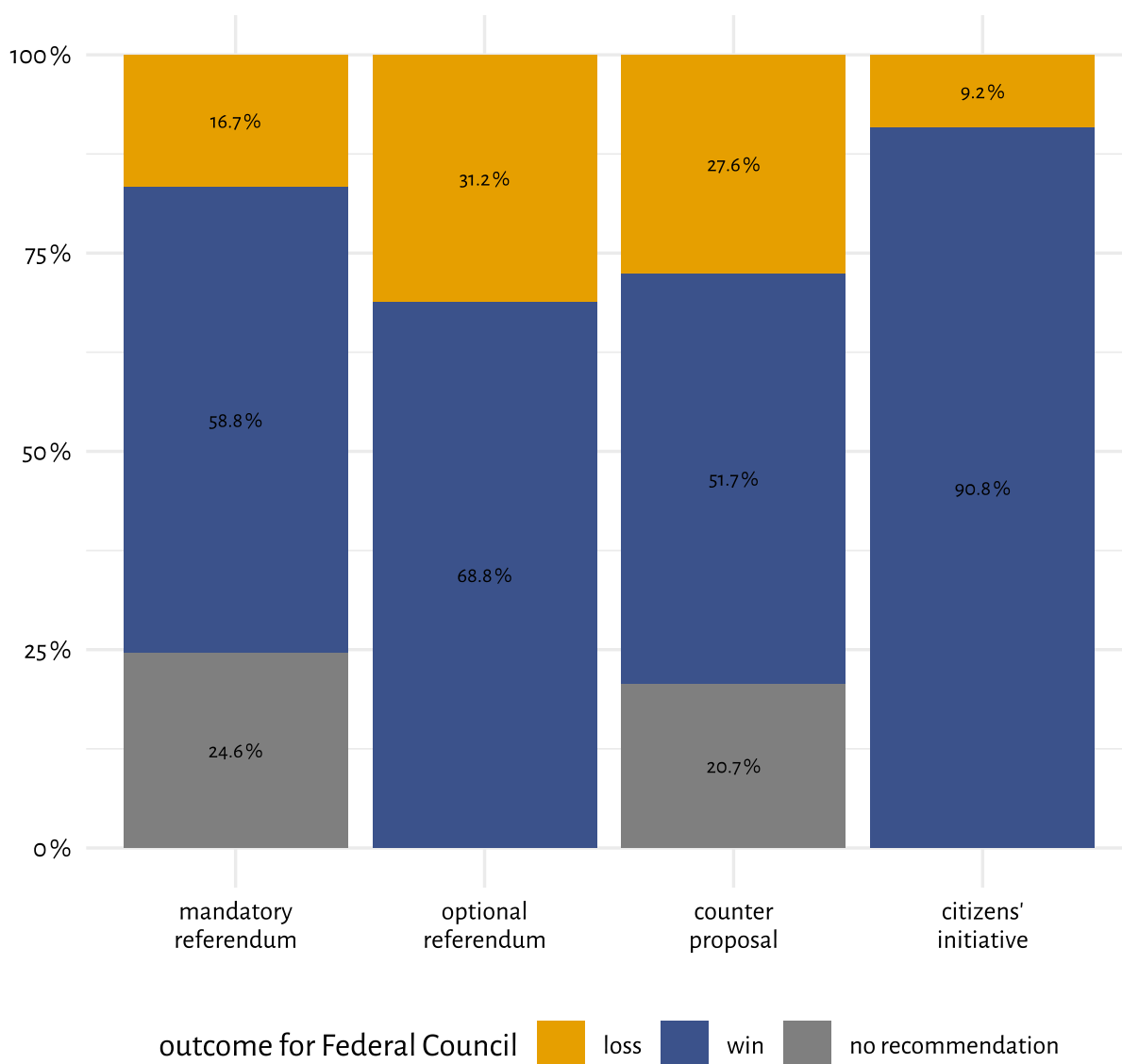


Figure 7.1 shows the congruence of the Federal Council's recommendation and the actual referendum in national votes per **legislature period**. If the public "follows" the Federal Council's recommendation, it is considered a *win*, if the the public opposes the recommendation, the government *loses* the referendum. Since 1979 it has only been in three instances where the share of wins for the Federal Council does not exceed 75 % of all referendums. Whilst the public and the government have agreed on the vast majority of votes from 1999 to 2003, the congruence dropped drastically in the following legislative

period. This could be due to the shift in the balance of power in the Federal Council with the new, second seat for the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC). In the current legislative period, the share of wins for the Federal Council is currently comparatively low. This might be subject to change however, as there are three more years to go in this period.

Noteworthy is the large share of referendums where the Federal Council has not given an official recommendation in the first two legislature periods. This could be explained by the fact that the voting booklet was only introduced in 1977. Since then, the voting booklet contains key information on the referendums at hand as well as the official recommendations of both the Federal Council and Parliament.

Figure 7.2.: Success rate of Federal Council in national referendums by type, 1971–2024



Taking a look at the share of referendums won by the Federal Council by type, we see clear differences (Figure 7.2). These can be explained by the differing operating logic. When a referendum is mandatory, both the Federal Council and Parliament try to minimise the potential of rejection by the citizens, as the process is very time- and resource-intensive. If a change in a law does not require a mandatory referendum, the government and law-makers might take

less balanced decisions. This is reflected in the higher share of lost optional referendums. However, the government is most successful when it comes to citizen's initiatives. Often stemming from a specific part of the political spectrum, initiatives can be considered to be "outsiders", even when initiated by political parties or associations. These factors make it easier for the Federal Council to gauge an initiative's potential of approval. When it comes to counter-proposals however, citizens seem to follow the government's recommendation far less frequently.

7.2. Success of National Council

Figure 7.3.: Share of yes votes of National Council & Population in national referendums by congruence & type, 1971–2024



The same pattern described above can be observed in Figure 7.3.¹ In this case, we consider the result to be congruent if the final vote in the National Council matches the decision of the popular vote. Accordingly, the result is incongruent if the public accepts a proposal that the National Council has rejected beforehand, and vice versa.

Analysing the results of the final vote on the issue at hand in the National Council, we see that the congruence differs again across the different types. However the pattern of the share of referendums the National Council has won/lost is very similar to the Federal Council's. Both optional referendums and counter-proposals are more frequently incongruent, meaning that the public deviates from the National Council's recommendation. Furthermore, we rarely see "perfect" congruence, indicated by the black diagonal in all four plots. Additionally, the National Council seems to be more opinionated in general, tending towards a clearer rejection or approval than the citizens Parliament represents.

¹ Some mandatory referendums and citizen's initiatives are depicted as rejected and therefore congruent/incongruent with the National Council's decision, even though a majority of citizens have accepted them. This is because they did not fulfill the "Ständemehr" double majority rule, i.e. the majority of cantons approving in addition to the majority of the population approving.

8. Conclusion and outlook

In Chapter 1, we show that Switzerland continuously holds around one fifth of all national-level referendums worldwide. In addition, we discuss the large variance of rules and regulations governing the use of Swiss direct democracy. We then turn to the empirical manifestations of referendums.

Analyzing the **frequency** of national and cantonal Swiss referendums (Chapter 2) reveals interesting trends in the practice of direct democracy. Since the 1970s, referendums have become less frequent, especially at the cantonal level. This decrease could reflect changes in referendum laws, but it could also be suggestive of possible shifts in governance approaches. Our analysis also shows that the number of votes varies strongly from one canton to another, reflecting the diverse and idiosyncratic legal foundations on the one hand, and possible cultural differences on the other.

Besides referendum frequency, we have also identified differences in **referendum types** (Chapter 3). At the national level, around two-thirds of referendums are triggered by citizens collecting signatures. One third of referendums at the national level are mandatory referendums, triggered by the federal constitution. The picture is different at the cantonal level, where around two thirds of referendums are triggered by the cantonal constitutions and citizens collecting signatures play less of a role. The cantons also differ widely in the types of referendums they hold, hinting at the different legal structures that govern the use of cantonal direct democracy.

Looking at the **topics** being voted on (Chapter 4), we can also identify certain trends. At the national level, we can see that the relative frequency of votes on *social policy* has increased over time. At the cantonal level, we have identified differences in topical frequency. For example, votes on *state organization*, *social policy* and *public finance* are much more frequent than votes on *agriculture*, *culture*, *energy*, or *security policy*.

Concerning **voter turnout** (Chapter 5), we can see that both national and subnational turnout is gradually increasing since the 1970s. In addition, we have identified some cantonal differences in turnout, most notably the high turnout in Schaffhausen, which we attribute to that canton's constitutional article that renders voting mandatory. Analyzing the congruence of national and cantonal referendums, we have found that voters participate consistently less in cantonal referendums that are not accompanied by a ballot date at the national level. This indicates a lower interest in cantonal issues than in national ones.

When it comes to **referendum outcomes** (Chapter 6), we see that *mandatory referendums* have the highest chance of success, followed by *counter proposals* and *optional referendums*. Unsurprisingly, *citizens' initiatives* have the lowest chance of success at both the national and the cantonal level. Again, there are cantonal idiosyncrasies that stand out, for example the widely differing success rates of *optional referendums* or *citizens' initiatives*. We were also able to identify differences with regard to the topic being voted on. For example, referendums on

the *environment and living space* were much less likely to succeed than referendums on *foreign policy* or *agriculture*. Nevertheless, the acceptance rate seems to hinge more on the type of referendum than on its topic.

Last but not least, we analyzed the **congruence** of the Swiss Federal and National Council with Swiss national referendum outcomes (Chapter 7). Here, we find some differences over time, indicating a fluctuating agreement of Swiss citizens with their government and with parliament.

For **further research**, we recommend exploring the underlying mechanisms behind the trends and differences identified in this report. For instance, it could be investigated to what extent the cantonal differences in turnout and acceptance rate can also be explained with cultural differences between the cantons. In addition, the effects of *postal voting* (Luechinger, Rosinger, and Stutzer 2007) or the *double affirmative vote* and the *tiebreak question* for citizens' initiatives and counter proposals (Degen 2016) could be analyzed. Furthermore, one could also investigate the extent to which the number of referendums on a certain day correlates with turnout and outcome. In addition, it could be conducive to further investigate the effects of cantonal constitutional revisions on the frequency and type of referendums. As a cantonal peculiarity, it could be investigated if cantonal *legislative initiatives* have different success rates than *constitutional initiatives*.

Moving forward, the RDB team plans to further improve and extend the data contained in the database. To that end, we plan to record cantonal referendums prior to 1970, and complete the *Landsgemeinde* votes to the dataset.

Part B.

International analysis

This part of the report provides a comparative overview of the data on national referendums worldwide contained in the *Referendum Database* and is only available in the [interactive online version](#).

Glossary

For more details on the Referendum Database, please refer to the [RDB codebook](#) (Brüggemann 2023).

Ballot date Date on which at least one referendum was held in a polity. In our analysis, we oftentimes analyze *ballot dates* instead of *referendums* in order not to artificially inflate the number of referendums in certain countries. In some constitutional referendums for example, each article of the constitution is voted on individually. This means that the vote on each article is counted as an individual referendum.

In general, differentiating between **referendums** and **ballot dates** entails a few tradeoffs:

- If we look at single **referendums**, the danger is that we count different response options to the same question as distinct events.
- If we only look at unique **ballot dates** per country, we solve this problem. However, we also lose distinct referendums that took place on the same date.

Ideally, we would include an additional variable in the *Referendum Database* denoting if referendums taking place on the same date belong together or if they are distinct. Until this linking variable has been implemented, we analyze ballot dates also in the Swiss context.

In Switzerland, the Federal Chancellery fixes four dates per year on which all national and subnational referendums are held ([Bundeskanzlei 2024](#)). Please note that we tally ballot dates for cantonal votes individually per canton. For example, when Aargau holds a cantonal vote on the same day as Zurich, this will be counted as two cantonal ballot dates in our database.

Canton (CH) Subnational entity of Switzerland. 26 cantons together form the Swiss Confederation ([Kley 2016](#)).

Citizen (CH) Enfranchisement in Swiss referendums varies over time and space. At the national level, women's suffrage was only introduced in 1971, voting age 18 in 1991. Today still, some citizens are excluded from voting because of a disability. Cantonal and even municipal enfranchisement rules can differ from the national rules. For example, Jura and Neuchâtel allow foreigners to vote in cantonal referendums; Glarus allows citizens to vote from the age of 16 ([Dermont 2021](#); [Poledna 2022](#)). Enfranchisement of Swiss national living abroad also varies between cantons.

Country In this report, we treat as "countries" those territorial units that hold referendums independently. Excluded from this are sub-national entities, such as federal states in the USA or cantons in Switzerland. Territories differ from federal states in that they may have a certain degree of autonomy, but they do not have the same extensive rights as federal states or provinces. As an example serves Greenland, which belongs to Denmark.

Although Greenland is not a province in its own right, it has far-reaching rights of self-determination. For example, the Greenlandic population can also decide on their own independence by referendum.

We rely on the classification into territorial units, based on the ISO 3166 standard that includes independent countries, territories and regions of geographical interest. Furthermore, ISO 3166-3 is used for historical countries that no longer exist.

Landsgemeinde (CH) The Landsgemeinde is a gathering of all enfranchised citizens of a canton to elect officials and pass laws. Some Swiss cantons have a Landsgemeinde tradition going back to the Middle Ages. Since the founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, almost all Landsgemeinden have been replaced with referendum democracy. Zug and Schwyz abolished the Landsgemeinde in 1848, Uri in 1928, Nidwalden in 1996, Appenzell Ausserrhoden in 1997, and Obwalden in 1998.

Today, only the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus still hold a yearly Landsgemeinde (Stadler 2021). In these two cantons, all enfranchised citizens meet once a year to vote on a wide range of issues. Elections and votes at cantonal level are held by a show of hands. The Landsgemeinde is regarded as the supreme authority of the respective cantons, although it does not replace parliament or the ballot box. The exact number of votes in favor of or against a proposal can only be estimated and cannot be determined precisely. This is also why these votes are excluded from this analysis.

Legal basis Several authors have identified the legal basis as an important aspect of referendums (Suksi 1993; Gallagher 1996; Setälä 1999; Altman 2017). In the RDB, **legal basis** can take on the following values:

- *non-official*: The referendum type has no legal basis.
- *ad-hoc*: The referendum type has a legal basis which was specifically created for it.
- *official*: The referendum type has a legal basis that wasn't specifically created for it.

Legislature period (CH) The legislature period is the length of a parliament before new elections are held. The National Council has a four-year legislature period. It begins and ends with the constituent sitting of the newly elected parliament, which is held in December after each national elections (The Swiss Parliament 2024).

Postal voting (CH) In Switzerland, postal voting was introduced in 1994 at the national level. Today, it is the most common form of voting (Serdült 2024, 212). It is estimated that the introduction of postal voting increased turnout by around 4 % (Luechinger, Rosinger, and Stutzer 2007).

Referendum instances In the RDB, we use the term **referendum** to refer to “[...] any popular vote on an issue of policy that is organized by the state or at least by a state-like entity, such as the authorities of a de facto state” (Mendez and Germann 2016, 144).

Regime type For regime type, we refer to the *Regimes of the World (RoW)* classification developed by the *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)* project (Coppedge et al. 2023). This classification divides countries into the following four

types, according to the competitiveness of access to power (polyarchy) and liberal principles:

- closed autocracy
- electoral autocracy
- electoral democracy
- liberal democracy

Additionally, we also use data compiled by Freedom House (2023) for robustness checks.

Topic The political topic that a referendum is held on. The topics are organized on a three-tier hierarchy which was developed together with [Swissvotes](#), the [Institute of Federalism of the University of Fribourg](#) and the [Section Politics of the Federal Statistical Office](#). More than one topic can be assigned to an individual referendum.

Turnout Share of registered voters participating in a referendum.

Trigger type The way the referendum is triggered:

- *automatic*: The referendum is triggered by a constitutional/legal requirement.
- *top down*: The referendum is triggered by an institution of the political elite like the monarch/president/government, the parliament, a territorial unit, the UN or another institution.
- *bottom up*: The referendum is triggered by citizen demand (e.g. a signature collection).

Type The institutional type of direct democracy which the referendum is an instance of ([Kriesi and Bernhard 2014](#)):

- *mandatory referendum*: A referendum that was automatically triggered by certain legal conditions, usually found in the constitution.
- *optional referendum*: A referendum on a law passed by parliament that came about because the required quorum of citizen opposition was met (usually a certain number of signatures) within a specified period after the law was passed.
- *governmental referendum*: A referendum launched by the government/executive or parliament/the legislative.
- *citizens' initiative*: A referendum launched by citizens, usually via a signature collection.
- *counter proposal*: A counter proposal by the government or parliament to a citizen's initiative.

At the cantonal level in Switzerland, the *referendum type* could be further differentiated ([Degen 2016](#); [Bätschmann 2017](#)):

- In addition to the *constitutional initiative*, some cantons also know the *legislative initiative*, in which the object of the initiative is a cantonal law.
- In addition, some cantons also provide for the *financial referendum*, and diverse forms of *administrative referendums*.

Waves of democratization For the *World of Referendums Report*, we aim to show how many and which types of referendums have occurred over different time periods. For these time periods, we refer to the original work done by Huntington (1993) and refined by Lührmann and Lindberg (2019).

World region To categorize countries into world regions, we rely on the [United Nations \(UN\) geoscheme](#) which subdivides all countries into up to three different grouping tiers based on the [UN M49 area code hierarchy](#).

See the documentation of the R function `rdb::add_world_regions()` for further details.

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Technical aspects

The analysis was conducted in R ([R Core Team 2024](#)) in a fully reproducible manner. Data was transformed with R packages from the *tidyverse* ([Wickham et al. 2019](#)). The visualizations were mostly generated with *ggplot2* ([Wickham 2016](#)) and *plotly* ([Sievert 2020](#)) using the *viridis* color palette ([Garnier et al. 2023](#)), the tables using *gt* ([lannone et al. 2024](#)).

The report's full source code repository is available on [GitLab](#), an exhaustive list of the exact R package versions used to generate this report is found as structured data in the file `input/report/renv/renv.lock` inside the repository.