

Institutionally Embedded Democratic Equalizers: Differential Political Involvement Effects of Voluntary Associations across Language Regions in Switzerland

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Abstract

Relying on the data of the Swiss Household Panel, the paper examines to what extent expressive, instrumental, and advocacy voluntary associations equalize the level of political involvement across language regions in Switzerland. Empirical evidence reveals that the positive effects of associations are consistently more pronounced in Latin cantons than in German ones. The differential can be traced back, on the one hand, to the lower engagement in political life among citizens in Latin cantons, which gives them greater leeway to increase it as a consequence of associational involvement. On the other hand, members within associations of the same type show very similar political participation levels across regions. Members pull participation among newcomers in Latin cantons to levels similar to those of their German-speaking counterparts. The size of these equalizing effects can be linked to internal dynamics specific to each associational type and to some features of the Swiss federal state.

Zusammenfassung

Anhand der Daten des Schweizer Haushalt-Panels untersucht das Paper, inwieweit expressive Vereine, instrumentelle Vereine und Vereine zur Verteidigung öffentlicher

[Correction added on October 17, 2021 after first online publication: the doi number and link has been corrected in How to cite section.]

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Interessen das Niveau des politischen Engagements in den Sprachregionen der Schweiz einander angleichen. Empirische Resultate zeigen, dass die positiven Effekte von Vereinen auf politisches Engagement in lateinischen Kantonen durchweg stärker ausgeprägt sind als in deutschen Kantonen. Einerseits lässt sich dieser Unterschied auf das geringere politische Engagement der Bürger in lateinischen Kantonen zurückführen, das ihnen einen grösseren Spielraum gibt, dieses als Folge des Vereinsengagements zu erhöhen. Andererseits zeigen die Mitglieder innerhalb von Vereinen desselben Typs zwischen unterschiedlichen Sprachregionen sehr ähnliche politische Beteiligungsniveaus. In den lateinischen Kantonen ziehen die Mitglieder die Neulinge auf ähnliche Partizipationsniveaus wie ihre deutschsprachigen Pendanten. Interne Dynamiken, die für jeden Verbandstyp spezifisch sind, sowie Merkmale des Schweizer Bundesstaates können mit dem Ausmass dieser angleichenden Effekte in Verbindung stehen.

Résumé

En utilisant les données du Panel suisse de ménages, l'article examine dans quelle mesure les associations expressives, instrumentales et de défense des intérêts publics égalisent le niveau d'engagement politique entre les régions linguistiques suisses. Les effets positifs des associations sont systématiquement plus prononcés dans les cantons latins que dans les cantons allemands. Cette différence s'explique, d'une part, par l'engagement plus faible dans la vie politique des citoyens des cantons latins, leur donnant une plus grande marge de manœuvre pour l'augmenter en conséquence de l'engagement associatif. D'autre part, les membres d'associations du même type affichent des niveaux de participation politique très similaires entre régions linguistiques. Les membres attirent les nouveaux arrivants dans les cantons latins vers des niveaux de participation similaires à ceux de leurs homologues germanophones. L'ampleur de ces effets égalisateurs est liée à des dynamiques internes propres à chaque type d'association et à certaines caractéristiques de l'État fédéral suisse.

KEYWORDS

Voluntary Associations, Political Participation, Political Opportunity Structure, Language Regions, Panel Data

INTRODUCTION: SUPPLYING AND SHAPING ACTIVE CITIZENS

The active involvement of citizens in political affairs represents the essence of democratic functioning. In the infancy of democracy, Tocqueville (2016 [1840]) highlighted the key role played by secondary associations in stimulating a “self-interest rightly understood” translating into higher democratic involvement. Associations are often described as meso-level entities acting as schools of democracy in which citizens can rehearse the attitudes and behaviors necessary in order to be active citizens.

With the rise of cross-country comparative research, the democratic effects of associations and social movements have been linked to the political opportunity structure they interact with in a given national context (Kriesi et al., 1992). In this perspective, institutions can be considered as providing an exogenous framework (Stadelmann-Steffen & Freitag, 2011) capable of exerting a top-down influence on collective action by presenting individuals and associations with both constraints and opportunities (Freitag, 2006). Despite the attractiveness of this approach, disentangling the role of specific institutions from the many factors they are inextricably linked to is a daunting exercise. One way to solve the issue is to find a set of cases that provide variation in terms of the political institutions of interest while at the same time being relatively similar in the key residual contextual factors. With a federal structure granting great independence to individual cantons that exhibit important heterogeneity in the content and exploitation of political institutions, Switzerland has been a fertile research field in this respect (e.g. Freitag, 2006; Manatschal & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2014; Stadelmann-Steffen & Freitag, 2011). Drawing on the idea that even political opportunity structures can be contextually dependent (Stadelmann-Steffen & Freitag, 2011), we show that the architecture of the Swiss federal system affects the supply of the type of individuals that join associations across language regions. Individuals joining associations in Latin (French and Italian) cantons show a gap in political participation when compared to their German counterparts because they are drawn from a cultural and institutional environment that is characterized by lower political involvement. By affecting the political involvement of their members, associations may leave such baseline differences unaltered, increase them, or act as democratic equalizers by decreasing them. Which of these three outcomes occurs is influenced by the way cultural and institutional differences between regional contexts interact with the internal functioning of different types of associations, whose *raison d'être* implies similar internal dynamics and a relative homogeneity of members' political involvement across regions. For associations relying on a bureaucratic configuration, the federal structure also partly explains this homogeneity through the presence of central peak organizations and local chapters at the regional or cantonal level (Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003).

Relying on the data of the Swiss Household Panel, this paper examines the following research question: To what extent can expressive, instrumental, and advocacy voluntary associations equalize the level of political involvement of the individuals joining them in language regions¹ that are characterized by different political and cultural institutions? Answering this question is not only important if one wants to delve into the political effects of associational involvement and the links it shows with political institutions; it also has important political implications since the low involvement of citizens in political life is a pervasive phenomenon in advanced democracies, and in Switzerland in particular (Siaroff, 2009). Democratic outcomes

¹While cantons would be the most appropriate contextual units to examine, the statistical power required by the panel data models we employ in this paper explains the focus on language regions. While we are able to solve some key endogeneity issues of cross-sectional approaches, we could not get reliable estimates by focusing on single cantons or on more fine-grained regional groupings composed of a lower number of respondents. We attribute cantons to language regions based on the official cantonal language or, for multilingual cantons, based on the language spoken by the majority of residents. Latin cantons are hence Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Ticino, Vaud, and Wallis. German cantons are Aargau, Appenzell Inner-Rhodes, Appenzell Outer-Rhodes, Basle-City, Basle-Country, Bern, Glarus, Graubünden, Lucerne, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Schaffhausen, Schwyz, Solothurn, St. Gall, Thurgau, Uri, Zug, and Zurich.

can be considered equitable only if all constituencies affected by them have contributed to their genesis. In order to operationalize political involvement, we consider both a general measure of interest in politics supposed to capture a genuine concern with the political world and the propensity to take part in federal polls to evaluate the impact on institutional political participation.

While we are cautious about giving a causal interpretation to the estimates we derive, our panel data approach gives us leverage to control for important endogeneity issues that affect existing cross-sectional literature. The empirical findings reveal that the positive effects of voluntary associations on political involvement are consistently more pronounced in Switzerland's Latin cantons than in its German ones. The differential can be traced back, on the one hand, to the lower level of engagement in political life of citizens in Latin cantons, which gives them greater leeway to increase their participation as a consequence of associational involvement. On the other hand, members within associations of the same type show very similar political participation levels across language regions. Members pull participation among newcomers in Latin cantons to levels similar to those of their German-speaking counterparts. The other side of the coin is the presence of a ceiling effect for German newcomers, whose high political involvement already makes them very similar to members before joining and limits the leeway for additional participation increments as a consequence of associational involvement. The size of these equalizing effects can be linked to internal dynamics specific to each associational type. In addition, some associational types are organized along a federal configuration, with central peak organizations influencing the functioning of local chapters. The findings imply that the ability of associations to act as schools of democracy that bridge the gaps between citizens in terms of democratic attitudes needs to be closely evaluated in relation to the institutional context in which they are embedded.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review the literature explaining why associations may have relevant democratic effects, and illustrate the peculiarities of the Swiss federal state and of the Swiss associational landscape. The following section provides a description of the data and of the methodological approach that we developed to estimate the political effects of associations and the heterogeneity of such effects between German and Latin cantons. We then present the results, before interpreting the main empirical patterns in the discussion. We conclude by highlighting the main implications of the paper as well as its limitations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FEDERALLY EMBEDDED SCHOOLS OF DEMOCRACY?

Micro-mechanisms: Voluntary associations as schools of democracy

Voluntary associations belong to the realm of civil society, a peculiar domain at the intersection of the contradictory forces governing the private (intimacy), public (power), and market (instrumentality) spheres (Seippel, 2005). Civil society is not characterized by the logics of any of these three spheres (intimacy, power, utility maximization), but at the same time it is not completely disconnected from them and can therefore partly embody them. Depending on the strength of each of these logics within a specific associational type, we distinguish between three main ideal types of associations: expressive, instrumental, and advocacy (Van der Meer et al., 2009). While these ideal types are very broad categories that do not match more detailed types covered by survey data, they are compatible with those used in papers based on different theoretical frameworks (e.g. Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003) or in the few attempts to derive empirical typologies (e.g. Roßteutscher & Van Deth, 2002). We focus on this ternary solution because it provides an encompassing and well-differentiated typology

that fits well with the list of associations provided in the data we focus on. Expressive groups (e.g. sports clubs, cultural associations) cater to the physical, emotional, and social needs of their members. Instrumental organizations (e.g. tenants' groups, unions) are centered on defending their members' interests. Advocacy associations (e.g. environmental organizations, charitable associations) focus on protecting and promoting public goods.

Thinking about the type of political attitudes and behaviors that may be shaped by associational membership, we consider two ideal-typical forms of political involvement. On the one hand, institutionalized forms of participation such as voting are characterized by the minimal acceptance of the workings of democracy by letting one's voice be heard through an act that either implies the delegation of decision-making to elected officials (representative democracy) or the expression of a preference regarding a specific policy issue (direct democracy). Existing research shows that this is the type of political participation most influenced by social norms and peer pressure (e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2020). As such, voting often turns into a habitual act that does not require particular personal elaboration or investment (aside from the time required to vote). On the other hand, forms of involvement such as a genuine interest in politics that leads to regular exposure to and discussion of political matters require individuals to go beyond their minimal duties as citizens by showing a personal attachment to and investment in the workings of the political sphere. This kind of political involvement goes beyond habitual social pressure and requires the assimilation of "civic habits" that make political involvement a value in itself (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1965).

Most existing research underlines the presence of a strong link between membership in voluntary associations and political involvement. This link is (often implicitly) interpreted in causal terms. If associations do actually exert such effects, they are said to act as "schools of democracy," teaching members the relevant political attitudes required in order for them to be active citizens in a democratic system. Recently, some authors have challenged this view by arguing that associations may in reality be "pools of democracy" (Van Ingen & Van der Meer, 2016). Instead of a causal impact of associational involvement, the stronger political involvement of members may be explained by the fact that associations attract individuals who are already highly involved in political life and do not experience additional positive effects after joining. The terms of the controversy between these two views are mainly methodological and we discuss them below.

If voluntary associations are indeed able to positively influence the political involvement of their members, this can happen through four main mechanisms: effects on political knowledge (e.g. McClurg, 2003), effects on politically relevant skills (e.g. Baggetta, 2009), peer pressure effects (e.g. Kelman, 1958), and effects on the normative evaluation of political participation (e.g. Lazer et al., 2010). The relevance of each one of these mechanisms varies according to the three macro-types we introduced above. While peer pressure is likely to be the main mechanism in apolitical contexts such as expressive associations (Seippel, 2005), the acquisition of new information and of political skills is more likely to play a key role in instrumental groups (McKenzie, 1996). Furthermore, horizon-broadening effects may also be of central importance in associations defending broad interests, such as unions (Mosimann & Pontusson, 2017). Advocacy associations can lead their members to transpose their passion for the public issues they stand for into the political arena, spurring political participation as a normative duty (Selle & Strømsnes, 1998).

Active membership, as opposed to passive membership, is often cited as a requirement for such effects (Almond & Verba, 1965). The frequency of interaction and the political expertise of those involved are particularly relevant elements to consider (Eveland & Hively, 2009). At the same time, checkbox membership, characterized by distant members that soothe their conscience by contributing to causes they believe in only by writing a check and receiving a newsletter in return (Skocpol, 1999), is a growing phenomenon, especially among advocacy

associations. While newsletters could be an informational channel spurring political involvement, another strand of literature highlights that even the sense of belonging to “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) can generate pro-social attitudes and reduce political alienation. In this perspective, voluntary associations are seen as symbols of the effectiveness of collective action, as reservoirs of social capital rather than socialization agents (Wollebæk & Selle, 2007).

Regional heterogeneity in Switzerland: Mirrors of the political and cultural world or democratic equalizers?

As described above, we group the 26 cantons that make up the Swiss federal state into Latin and German cantons. The Swiss political system is characterized by two peculiarities: a federal structure and the presence of a channel of direct democracy (Vatter, 2020). The federal structure gives cantons great autonomy in their local political workings. German and Latin cantons show considerable differences in the way they exploit the options offered by the political system. While no canton fully embraces the ideal type of a representative or direct democracy (Stadelmann-Steffen & Freitag, 2011), the adherence to the notion of representative democracy and to its implications, for example through a central role given to local parliaments, is much more developed in Latin areas (Ladner, 2007). Delegating power to elected representatives of a central government that takes responsibility for political matters is at the core of this conception of democracy. At the other end, in German-speaking areas the state plays a more subsidiary role by placing citizens at the center of the democratic project, directly involving them as much as possible in political decisions. In particular, the channel of direct democracy is more accessible and more frequently used in German-speaking cantons than elsewhere. As an extreme case, in the German canton of Schaffhausen, voting is compulsory and citizens cannot freely opt out of political life (Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003). Heterogeneous political institutions and practices at the cantonal level in different parts of Switzerland, some of which date back to the 19th century, have exerted long-term socializing effects on the dominant political outlook of individuals in those areas. Citizens in German cantons have a stronger attitudinal involvement in that they are more interested in politics, they are normatively attached to the political world in that they consider participation a personal duty, and they are more likely to get involved in federal polls and elections (Wernli, 1998).

The question is to what extent these differences in terms of political institutions between language regions translate into differences in the associational landscape between the two regions we study. The neo-institutionalist perspective implies that political and institutional elements provide an imprint of constraints and opportunities that influence individual and collective behavior (e.g. Hall & Taylor, 1996). If they are of the right kind, democratic institutions can exert a positive top-down influence on associational involvement and, more generally, on the stock of social capital of a given social context (Freitag, 2006). Direct democracy appears to offer the right kind of rules of the political game that can stimulate associational involvement.² By offering a direct channel of political influence, direct democracy generates incentives for citizens to join associations, acting as units that encapsulate and articulate the interests of specific social groups. Beyond the search for political influence, this involvement is also associated with the creation of deliberative spaces that indirectly spur social norms such

²In reality, as Stadelmann-Steffen and Freitag (2011) show, pure representative democracy can also stimulate associational involvement. However, this can be appreciated only by delving into the institutional specificities of every canton, which is not possible through the binary regional classification we focus on. For the sake of simplicity, since the positive effects of direct democracy exceed those associated with the delegation of political power, we only highlight the virtues of direct democracy for associational involvement.

as solidarity and trust, which in turn are conducive to associational life. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that, compared to Latin ones, German cantons are characterized by a more vibrant associational life, which is associated with a larger number of associations and a higher propensity to become involved in them (Freitag, 2004; Freitag & Ackermann, 2014; Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003; Traunmüller et al., 2012). By contrast, the stronger tendency to delegate political power to elected representatives of citizens in Latin cantons is associated with a stronger focus on the core ties of friends and family (Freitag, 2004; Freitag & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2009).

However, German and Latin cantons differ not only in terms of the use of political institutions, but also through many other factors that may explain the differences related to political beliefs. The core dimension at the origin of the differences is the linguistic divide (Kriesi et al., 1996). “Language is both the vehicle of most of cross-cultural research and part of its object. Language is the most clearly recognizable part of culture and the part that has lent itself most readily to systematic study and theory-building” (Hofstede, 1980: 34). In other words, language is the main means through which cultural traits are created and transmitted between generations. To put it briefly, Hofstede (1980) found that German and Latin regions belong to two different cultures. In particular, levels of power tolerance and subordination are much lower in the former than in the latter. Freitag and Stadelmann-Steffen (2009) show that French-, Italian-, and German-speaking cantons share the same cultural worlds of neighboring countries, cemented by the role of media and artistic production. As a consequence, citizens in these language regions have a propensity to take part in formal associational activities that resembles much more that of neighboring countries than of a different Swiss language region. Therefore, beyond political institutions, the cultural traits differentiating German and Latin regions also contribute to explaining the higher level of engagement in the public sphere and in the political world in German-speaking cantons.

While associational involvement patterns by canton and language region have received considerable attention, there is little research available on the individual political effects of Swiss associations. Moreover, we are not aware of any study on the heterogeneity of these effects between language regions. We make four alternative hypotheses in this regard. First, if associations are “pools of democracy” rather than “schools of democracy,” the average citizen should not experience any change in political attitudes after joining an association. This would happen in a context in which activists are drawn from the most active parts of civil society, acting as mirrors of dominant political practices of a certain geographic area rather than affecting change (Roßteutscher, 2002). If this was the case, associations should leave the differences in terms of political involvement between German and Latin cantons unaltered. When correlating the average number of people involved in associations with the average tendency to vote at the cantonal level, Freitag and Ackermann (2014: 74–75) find no significant link between the two variables.

This empirical evidence is also consistent with a second scenario. If political beliefs are the result of long-term socialization effects, influenced also by the local cultural context an individual grew up in, they are likely to be inertial to change (Prior, 2010). The imprint of pre-associational experiences may be so strong that no additional effects are to be expected as a consequence of associational involvement. Again, this would imply that regional differences in political involvement would not be affected by associations. It would be possible to distinguish empirically between this second scenario and the first if one could measure the attitudes of joiners before and after associational involvement and compare them with those of members.

Relying on unusually rich data at the municipal level crossing both information on associations and on the experiences of individual members, Traunmüller et al. (2012: 129–131) and Stadelmann-Steffen and Gundelach (2015) approach the same issue from another angle. They show that associational involvement is much better explained by the language of the municipality an individual resides in than by the language she uses within her household. The only

exception are Italian-speaking households, which exhibit lower-than-average involvement levels even after moving to German- or French-speaking cities. They continue to be strongly influenced by early socialization experiences even after moving to German- or French-speaking cities. Excluding this residual category of Italian speakers and potential self-selection by movers who already have a similar propensity to be involved in associations as citizens in the municipality they move to, this implies that the cultural imprint of the language region on associational involvement is not immutably interiorized in practices that influence behavior throughout an individual's life course, but is linked to contextual effects that can modify new residents' propensity for associational involvement. If the propensity to become involved in associations is malleable to contextual effects, this leaves open the possibility that political engagement may also change after exposure to another type of local context, i.e. the association an individual joins.

Assuming that associations act as local contexts capable of modifying the political participation of joiners, for our purposes we still need to determine whether they widen or narrow the political involvement gap between citizens in German and Latin regions. The widening of the participation gap is the third scenario we consider. If associations were contexts characterized by a higher political engagement than the rest of society and this engagement was proportional to the general political involvement in a canton, political involvement effects in German cantons should be proportionally more important than in Latin ones and the differential between joiners should increase. The same studies cited above that identify a stronger associational involvement in German over Latin cantons provide empirical evidence against this expectation. Indeed, the local context acts as a strong selection mechanism that influences the likelihood of joining an association. Still, the propensity to be actively involved in an association after joining is very similar across language regions (Freitag & Ackermann, 2014: 47–48; Traunmüller et al., 2012: 104–105). In other words: the context surrounding associations appears to be quite different between language regions, but once the barriers/incentives to join have been controlled for and individuals are inside associations, the engagement level of those inside is very similar across language regions.

If the inner workings of associations were indeed similar across cantons, as the fourth and last scenario, we may expect voluntary associations to act as democratic equalizers between language regions. This situation is similar to the differential associational effects by education levels (e.g. Verba et al., 1995). Since joiners in Latin cantons are embedded in a political context characterized by generally lower political involvement, they may exhibit lower participation levels to begin with (when compared to those in German cantons). Hence, they experience stronger effects because they have greater leeway to do so. Besides the similar level of active engagement between language regions, the similarity between associations may also be linked to Swiss federalism. In fact, “Swiss associations very often are national federations with cantonal and/or local chapters” (Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003: 6). Unfortunately, Kriesi and Baglioni do not specify which types of associations are affected by this federal configuration.

DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: THE UPSIDES OF A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE

Data: The Swiss Household Panel

This paper examines the link between associational membership and political involvement in Switzerland, using the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) (2021). The SHP is based on a random sample of private households and provides representative data for the Swiss population since 1999. The survey includes several questions related to involvement in voluntary associations. We consider two types of expressive associations (sports clubs, cultural associations), three

TABLE 1 – Description of the associational membership variables and of the dependent variables

Variable	Question(s)	Answer options	Waves
Associational membership	I will now read out a list of associations and organisations. Could you tell me for each of them whether you are an active member, a passive member or not a member? - Sports or leisure - Culture - Tenants' rights - Local or parents' - Unions - Protection of the environment	- Nonmember (0) - Passive member (1) - Active member (2)	1999–2009, 2011, 2014, 2017
Interest in politics	Generally, how interested are you in politics, if 0 means "not at all interested" and 10 "very interested"?	0–10	1999–2017
Participation in federal polls	Let's suppose that there are 10 federal polls in a year. How many do you usually take part in?	0–10	1999–2017

types of instrumental groups (tenants' groups, parents' associations, unions), and one type of advocacy organization (environmental groups). We use all waves of the SHP that ask about membership in such associations: 1999–2009, 2011, 2014, and 2017. For all associational types, we distinguish between the effects of passive and active membership.

Regarding the outcome variables, following the broad dichotomy we sketched out above, we focus on a general attitudinal dimension (interest in politics) and on a behavioral dimension linked to institutional voting (participation in federal polls).³ Both are expressed on 0–10 scales. The wording of survey questions and operationalization of these variables are reported in Table 1.

Either because of overrepresentation of politically involved individuals among survey respondents or because of overreporting in survey answers by respondents, existing research has shown that survey data on political participation tend to overestimate actual participation (Sciarini & Goldberg, 2016). Nevertheless, the issue is unlikely to affect the estimates presented below since they are solely based on within-individual variation, cancelling out baseline over- or underreporting differences between individuals.

In the models described below, we also use a standard set of exogenous control variables appearing in previous literature:⁴ the individual's age group, level of education, nationality, marital status, region of residence, working status,⁵ a variable related to the type of residential community (urban, suburban, rural), and a set of time dummies for each year considered. Descriptive statistics on all variables are available in Table A1, Appendix A.

³In order to consider a participation mode typical of the model of representative democracy, we also wanted to include a variable operationalizing the propensity to vote in elections. Unfortunately, the question related to voting intentions in SHP data is framed in a way that triggers respondents to choose a preferred party even if they have no intention to vote. It is therefore a very unreliable measure of the concept (propensity to vote *or not*) we are interested in.

⁴The respondent's gender is time-invariant; therefore, it cannot be employed as an explanatory variable in models focusing on within-individual variation.

⁵We focus on all respondents for all associations except for unions; for the latter, we restrict the analyses to wage-earners, who are the category of individuals most likely to join unions.

Model specification: The weight of the unobservable

In order to examine to what extent the average treatment effects of associational involvement on political attitudes are heterogeneous across language regions, we apply the fixed effects estimator⁶ on the following specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta P_{it} + \gamma A_{it} + \delta I_{it} + \zeta P_{it} \times I_{it} + \iota A_{it} \times I_{it} + C'_{it} \eta + v_i + \mu_{it}, \text{ for } i = 1, 2, \dots, N \text{ and } t = 1, 2, \dots, T \quad (1)$$

where the subscripts i and t represent individuals and time periods, respectively; Y_{it} is the dependent variable; α is an intercept term assumed to be the same for all individuals in all time periods; β is the coefficient of a passive membership status; P_{it} is a dummy variable coded as 0 if the individual is not a passive member in a given year and 1 if she is a passive member; γ is the coefficient of an active membership status; A_{it} is a dummy variable coded as 0 if the individual is not an active member in a given year and 1 if she is an active member; δ is the coefficient associated with German cantons when compared to Latin ones; I_{it} is a dummy variable coded as 0 if the individual lives in a Latin canton and 1 if in a German canton; $(P_{it} \times I_{it})$ and $(A_{it} \times I_{it})$ are the two interaction terms between the passive (P) and active (A) membership status (respectively) and the interacting variable I (language region), whose estimates are given by ζ and ι , respectively; C_{it} is the set of observed control variables described above; η is the set of coefficients of the control variables; v_i corresponds to all variables that affect the dependent variable and vary across individuals but not over time; μ_{it} represents all variables not included in the model that affect the dependent variable and vary across individuals and over time.

Existing research shows that the political effects of associational involvement do not dissipate after leaving (Hooghe, 2003). Therefore, for each associational type, we restrict the analyses to the first observed membership spell. Also, we only focus on transitions from non-member to member and do not consider the opposite transition (from member to nonmember) as having effects mirroring those of the joining phase. Clustered robust standard errors with the individual as cluster unit are used to account for potential issues of serial correlation and heteroscedasticity.

Above, we have highlighted that most existing literature argues that associations have a causal impact on the political attitudes of their members by acting as “schools of democracy.” The empirical evidence used to back up this conclusion is almost exclusively based on cross-sectional analyses where the dependent variable of interest is correlated with an indicator of associational involvement after partialling out the effect of some observable controls. In fact, it is part of the inherent character of the process of joining associations that socially and politically active individuals are more likely to become members. Therefore, their average level of political involvement is already higher than that of nonmembers before joining. Observable controls are supposed to capture such selection process and make sure that any remaining correlation between associational engagement and political involvement is causally related to associational engagement rather than to pre-existing differences between prospective members and nonmembers. However, observable controls may not be enough to control for selection effects if these are related to unobservable time-invariant variables. Rather than assuming that observable covariates capture these unobservable patterns, repeated observations over the same individuals make it possible to focus on specifications that control for this source of bias. The specification we use allows us to control not only for observable controls but also for all time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity between nonmembers and members. Time-invariant omitted variables such as personality

⁶Among the linear alternatives that could be considered (e.g. first-differences), fixed effects is the best option with unbalanced panel data with participation gaps for some individuals.

traits are very likely to bias the estimation of the link between associational involvement and political attitudes.

Nevertheless, even panel data models are still exposed to a residual issue of endogeneity related to time-varying causality. Indeed, an increase in political engagement as a consequence of a general increase in social involvement may be one of the reasons leading an individual to join an association. Working with yearly data, other than controlling for the most likely time-varying variables that may be linked to such endogenous increase in political engagement, there is not much else we can do to deal with the issue since finding valid and strong instrumental variables is very difficult. Conscious of this limitation, we below avoid any explicit reference to causality when interpreting our results, although we argue that our estimation strategy represents a significant improvement on the dominant cross-sectional approach.

RESULTS: HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS AND THE REASONS BEHIND THEM

Interaction effects: Consistently stronger effects in Latin cantons

Since the main goal of our analysis is to examine the interaction effects between membership status (passive or active) and language region (Latin or German cantons) for six types of associations, we plotted the estimates of interest in Figure 1. In addition, the controls are not central to our analysis since the focus on within-individual switches renders the impact of most of them almost irrelevant. The only variables with important and consistent effects across models are time dummies, signaling a peak in interest in politics between 2008 and 2009 and two peaks of participation in federal polls in 2005 and 2017 in the Swiss population. Full regression tables with standard errors and exact p-values are available in Tables B1-2, Appendix B.

In Figure 1, we plot the effects of passive and active membership status in Latin cantons, used as reference category. The heterogeneity of these effects with respect to German cantons is given by a deviation line departing from the symbol representing the respective estimate in Latin cantons. The length of the line is equivalent to the corresponding interaction effect available in regression tables. Nonsignificant (grey) and significant (black) estimates can be identified based on their filling color.

The empirical pattern visible in Figure 1 shows the presence of highly consistent heterogeneous effects between Latin and German cantons. With six associations, two membership statuses, and two dependent variables, we have 24 pairs of estimates representing the effect within Latin cantons and the deviation from it in German ones. Although not all of them clear the threshold of statistical significance, all imply positive political involvement effects for Latin joiners and weaker effects among German ones. The fact that even small nonsignificant effects are all in line with the pattern lets us suppose that, at least for some, the lack of statistical significance is probably related to statistical power issues.

Focusing on the interaction effects related to interest in politics that are actually statistically significant, we observe significantly stronger positive effects in Latin cantons for joining cultural associations (active: 0.15* vs. -0.15*), unions (active: 0.37*** vs. -0.23*), and environmental groups (passive: 0.20** vs. -0.17*; active: 0.38*** vs. -0.23*). Looking at the interaction effects related to participation in federal polls, we observe significantly stronger effects in Latin cantons for joining sports clubs (passive: 0.22* vs. -0.27**; active: 0.27*** vs. -0.29**), cultural associations (passive: 0.24** vs. -0.29***), tenants' associations (passive: 0.38** vs. -0.56***), and environmental organizations (passive: 0.31*** vs. -0.39***; active: 0.24* vs. -0.29*).

On the one hand, these strong differentials are related to the presence of important effects in Latin cantons. On the other hand, they also appear because almost all estimates within German cantons are not significantly different from zero. Indeed, in only three cases (tenants: active (0.18*); unions: active (0.14*); environment: active (0.13*)) do we detect barely significant

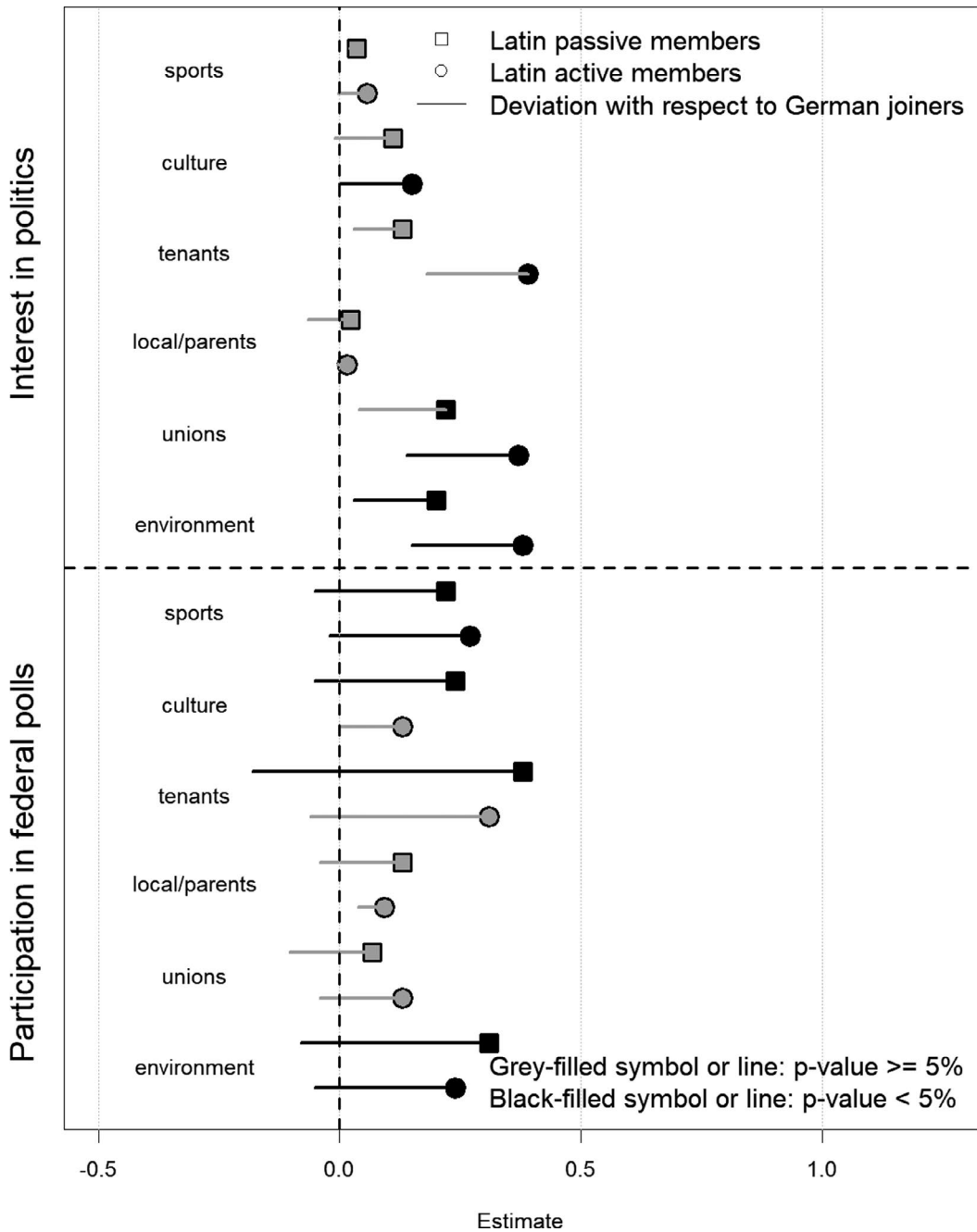


FIGURE 1 Average treatment effects of joining various types of associations in Latin cantons and effects' deviations with respect to German cantons
Source: Swiss Household Panel (SHP)

positive effects on interest in politics among German joiners, while a negative significant effect is visible on participation in federal polls (tenants: passive (-0.18*)).

Beyond statistical significance, it is worth highlighting that the magnitude of these estimates makes them also substantively significant. If we consider the likelihood of experiencing a 1-point increase in the two dependent variables among the associations that show significant

effects either on passive or active members, in comparison to her German counterpart, the average Latin joiner has 15 to 23% higher chances of experiencing such an increase in interest in politics and 27 to 56% higher chances of participating in federal polls.

Making sense of interaction effects: Greater leeway for Latin newcomers

In order to make sense of these consistently stronger effects in Latin cantons, we want to verify whether they can be linked to the differences in terms of political involvement between citizens in different cantons and to the internal dynamics of the same types of associations across cantons. In Figure 2, we focus on the average level in the two dependent variables of interest, distinguishing each time between Latin and German cantons, for three groups of individuals: those who never join any of the associations we consider; those about to join one of them in the following year; and members. The numeric values underlying these plots are available in Tables A3-4, Appendix A.

We detect three main empirical patterns. First, individuals who join at least one association are clearly more politically involved than those who do not.⁷ The average level of interest in politics for those who never join an association in Latin (3.8) and German (4.4) cantons is clearly lower than that of an individual joining at least one of the associations of interest in Latin (4.4) and German (5.5) cantons. Similarly, although in this case the difference between Latin (6.3) and German (6.2) regions is very small, the “never joiners” exhibit a lower propensity to take part in federal polls when compared to joiners (Latin (6.7); German (7.1)). In other words, associations attract a specific part of the Swiss population that is more involved in the political world to begin with.

Second, within the same associational type, Latin and German members with the same subjective level of involvement (passive or active) exhibit very similar average levels in both dependent variables. While tenants’ groups are the only associational type that shows slightly greater differences, the average level of interest in politics or of participation in federal polls among passive and active members in the two language regions is either equivalent or exhibits a difference not greater than 0.1 for all other associational types. In other words, when they are evaluated in terms of their political involvement level, Latin and German members of the same type of association are almost indistinguishable.

Third, newcomers declare a lower level of political involvement in the year before joining when compared to individuals who are already members. This gap in participation of newcomers is more consistent and stronger in Latin cantons than in German ones. The few exceptions to this pattern are found in participation in federal polls for prospective passive members in cultural associations (same value in both regions) and active newcomers in cultural associations (Latin newcomers more involved by 0.4 than their German counterparts) and local/parents’ associations (Latin newcomers more involved by 0.2 than their German counterparts). In most cases, German newcomers also show a gap with members, but the gap is clearly less pronounced. Coupled with the first pattern we described, newcomers in Latin cantons, compared to those in German cantons, thus have greater leeway to increase participation and become closer in terms of political involvement to the members they are about to interact with after joining an association.

⁷Implementing explicit tests comparing the means provided in these tables is formally statistically pertinent, but it is practically not necessary considering the large number of observations we rely on. All mean comparison tests end up significant, even those concerning very small differences. Therefore, we prefer to follow a descriptive approach focusing mainly on the substantive significance of mean differences rather than on statistical significance.

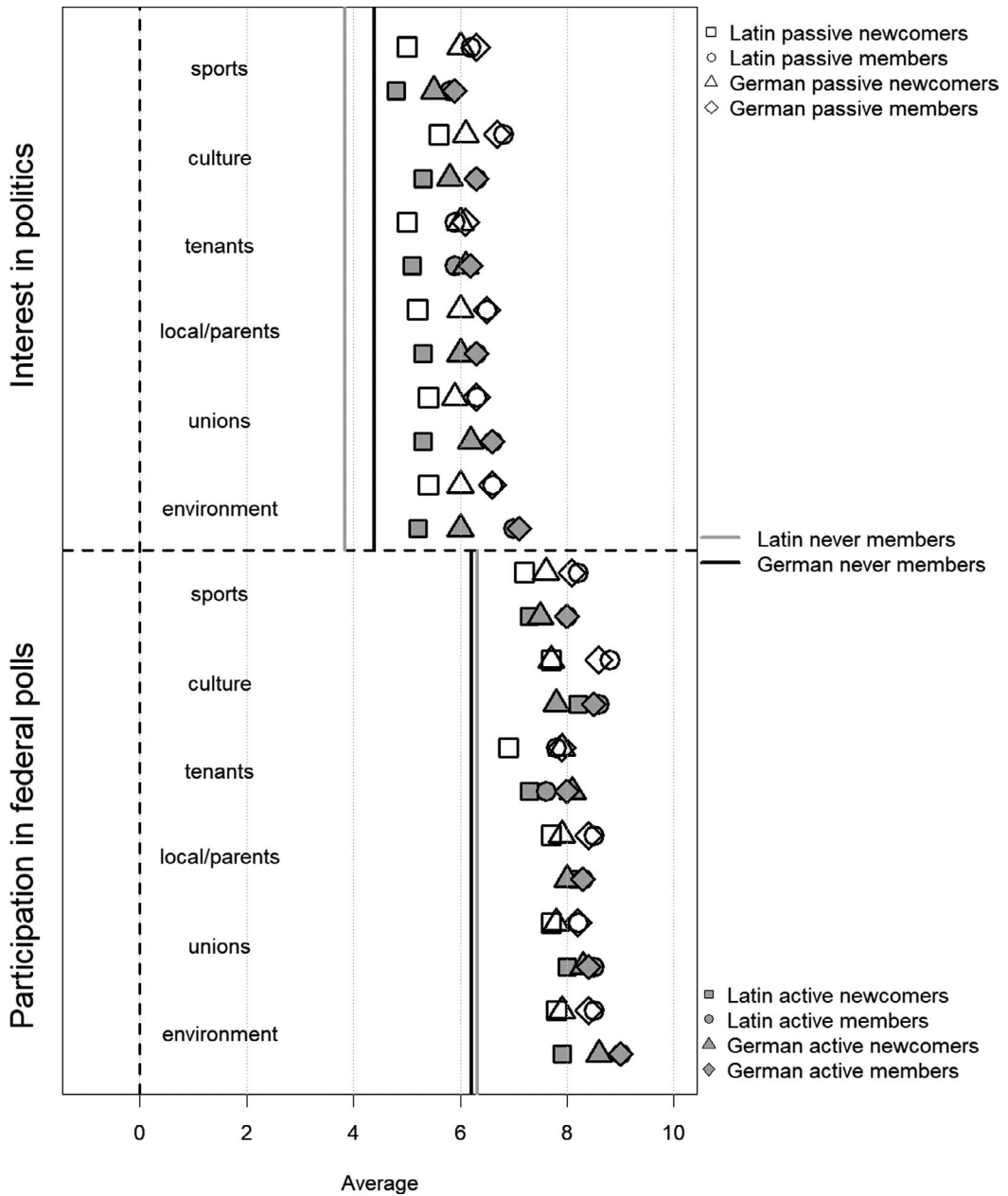


FIGURE 2 Average for the two dependent variables for newcomers and members in Swiss German and Latin cantons

Source: Swiss Household Panel (SHP)

DISCUSSION: HOMOGENEOUS DEMOCRATIC ISLANDS

General empirical patterns: Consistent democratic equalizers

The goal of this paper was to explore the contextual heterogeneity associated with the effects on political involvement of voluntary associations by focusing on the institutional and cultural differences between German and Latin cantons in Switzerland. Knowing that the political

engagement between German and Latin cantons shows a differential in favor of the former, we tested the extent to which associations may reduce, leave unaltered, or exacerbate this differential. In terms of political involvement, our results suggest that voluntary associations act as democratic equalizers between Latin and German regions. Indeed, a fixed-effects regression analysis with interaction effects between membership in various types of associations and language region clearly points to positive and stronger effects on interest in politics and participation in federal polls in Latin cantons. In other words, the gains of associational membership for political involvement are clearly more pronounced in Latin cantons. And this differential shows up in expressive, instrumental, and advocacy associations.

Trying to explain the origin of such differentials, we explored the average political involvement of individuals about to join an associational type and the involvement level of the individuals they are about to interact with. The pattern of results reveals that, inside associations, members have practically identical political involvement levels in almost every associational type across language regions. Although there are general differences in terms of political involvement between the German and the Latin population, associations appear to be exceptional islands that do not obey the same rules since, in terms of political involvement, associations of the same type are homogeneous across regions. While we do not have information on the internal dynamics and on the potential links between associations, we can advance two hypotheses to explain such homogeneity. On the one hand, since the similarity across regions appears only within the same types of associations but not between all types, we may suppose that associations of the same type are linked together by some dynamics intrinsic to their type. These are independent from the regional context in which they are embedded and, on average, are associated with members having similar levels of political involvement. Indeed, as already highlighted by existing research through other survey data, the regional context has a strong influence on the probability to join associations. After contextual barriers/incentives have exerted their entry effect, however, the propensity of individuals inside associations to be actively involved is very similar across language regions. In Table A2, Appendix A, we confirm the same empirical pattern with SHP data by looking at the proportion of members and their propensity to be active members in the two language regions. With the exception of tenants' groups, German citizens are more likely to become involved in any of the other five associational types. However, the proportion of active members is similar across language regions or in some cases even higher in Latin cantons. A second interpretation consistent with this homogeneity across language regions is the presence of a federal configuration with subsidiaries across cantons as previously cited in the literature (Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003). The organization of unions with peak associations at the federal level (Oesch, 2007) is in line with this hypothesis. Environmental groups are also generally affiliated to central headquarters that manage local chapters through a bureaucratic structure (Skocpol, 1999). It is however more difficult to apply this federal structure to associations such as sports, cultural, tenants', and local/parents associations that are eminently linked to the local context.

While members look very much alike across language regions, prospective joiners are clearly marked by the fact of living in a region characterized by lower or higher political engagement. In the year before joining an association, Latin newcomers show a consistently lower level of political involvement (either in terms of interest in politics or participation in federal polls) than their German-speaking counterparts. Since members are very similar across language regions, Latin joiners hence have greater leeway in terms of becoming closer to the participation levels of long-term members, which explains the stronger effects they experience. After joining, members from the two regions ultimately look the same from the point of view of political participation. Associations equalize the participation gap that exists between newcomers in Latin and in German cantons by exerting stronger positive effects on the former. The other side of the coin is a much weaker, almost always not significantly different from zero, effect on political involvement for German-speaking joiners. We interpret it as a ceiling effect. By living in a region characterized by high political participation even among nonmembers, German newcomers show political involvement levels even before

joining that are very similar to those of members they are about to interact with. This does not leave them much to gain in interactions with individuals to whom they are already similar to begin with.

The overall pattern of results also shows that such positive effects of democratic equalization concern both attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, since both interest in politics and participation in federal polls exhibit these effects. The pattern is also consistent across associational types and level of subjective activism (passive or active), since even the few estimates that do not reach statistical significance all have signs that confirm the presence of stronger positive changes within associations in Latin cantons compared to German ones. In other words, although different associational contexts display different internal dynamics, our results imply that they are all to some extent effective in bridging the political involvement gap between Swiss language regions.

Heterogeneity by associational type: Moving at different democratic paces

While the direction of differential effects between language regions is the same across all associational types and can be explained by the general considerations provided in the previous paragraphs, the substantive and statistical significance of these effects varies by associational type. Environmental associations are the only type of association that is more effective in Latin than in German cantons in significantly increasing both interest in politics and participation in federal polls for passive and active members. Since advocacy associations are the main type concerned with the rise of checkbook membership, the effect on passive members shows that when individuals feel attached to societal goals such as protecting the environment, the feeling of attachment to an “imagined community” reinforced by donations and newsletters received in return can be enough to increase political involvement (Schroeder et al., 2004). For active members, the important effects appear to be linked to the fact that these individuals exhibit the strongest attitudinal and behavioral involvement in political matters among all associational types and exert a positive influence on less involved newcomers, especially in Latin cantons.

Tenants’ groups also exhibit strong positive interaction effects (although these are not always significant because the number of joiners is the lowest of all associations) in both outcome variables and for both types of members. By focusing on specific issues very relevant to their members, instrumental associations like those defending the rights of tenants or homeowners increase members’ political awareness, as well as their likelihood of becoming politically engaged as a means to defend instrumental interests (McKenzie, 1996). For passive members in German cantons, we also detect the only negative significant effect on participation in federal polls. While we found no existing literature on this aspect, we suppose that unsuccessful bureaucratic experiences of some joiners in defending their rights may have generated frustration vis-à-vis the institutional system in the portion of joiners driving the negative effect.

While local and parents’ associations are also centered around local interests, they are the only associational context that exhibits neither pronounced political effects on the average joiner nor significant differentials between Latin and German cantons. These groups seem to be the only truly apolitical associations among those we studied, which leads their members to center on issues that do not have horizon-opening spillover effects in the political domain.

Union membership is associated with strong positive interaction effects in favor of Latin cantons when it comes to interest in politics, but not when it comes to participation in federal polls. The former is an expected pattern considering the increase of involvement in the public and political sphere of unions (Baccaro et al., 2003). The latter absence of effect is explained by the very similar and high propensity to take part in federal polls that characterizes newcomers and long-term members across cantons. Accordingly, self-selection based on political participation is stronger for unions than for other associational types in Latin and German-speaking

regions. Indeed, the increased public visibility of unions and pre-membership contact with unionized work colleagues increase the chances of anticipatory socialization that limits the leeway for an additional effect on newcomers after they become members (Hadziabdic & Baccaro, 2020).

The two types of expressive associations, sports and cultural groups, show a peculiar pattern of weak heterogeneous effects between cantons in terms of interest in politics, but a much more pronounced positive influence in Latin cantons when it comes to participation in federal polls. The apolitical character of expressive associations, which is consistent with the existence of peer pressure effects only on the most salient behavioral dimension and not on the most intimate attitudinal one, may explain this surprising empirical pattern. Indeed, different types of artistic and cultural activities have been linked to positive effects on political participation (Dini et al., 2014). Face-to-face interactions primarily explain such effects (Baggetta, 2009). Peer pressure can be a strong motivation to increase political involvement, especially if the change is a *sine qua non* for maintaining social bonds an individual is particularly attached to (Kelman, 1958), such as may happen in expressive groups.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: INSIDE ASSOCIATIONAL TYPES AND BEYOND SWITZERLAND

The elements described above show that the democratic effects of voluntary associations can interact with the political opportunity structure in which they are embedded. In the past, associations have been described as contexts that may even widen the political participation gap in the population (e.g. Miller, 2010). When we focus on language regions in Switzerland, however, associations appear to be able to bridge the political involvement gap between citizens living in regions with different general levels of political engagement.

From a neo-institutional perspective, our findings confirm that local political institutions play a key role as a selection mechanism that determines the proportion of citizens joining associations and also the average profile (more or less involved in politics) of newcomers. Inside associations, however, the influence of the local context appears to be less obvious since the propensity to be an active member and the level of political involvement look very similar, at least across language regions. We hypothesized that this homogeneity within the same associational types across language regions may be linked to internal dynamics inherent to every associational type or, for some associations, also to the presence of a federal configuration with peak organizations linked to local chapters. Nevertheless, our data do not provide us with detailed information on contextual elements or on the internal dynamics characterizing each association. We used the language region of residence and the associational type as proxies for differences in terms of political opportunity structures and for the existence of different internal associational dynamics. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms explaining the pattern of results we identify would require information on the specific association an individual is a member of and on the specific activities that member is involved in within the association (Baggetta & Madsen, 2019). Contextual information on the links (potentially across regions) between single associations is also needed. If possible to put aside statistical power issues, an analysis by canton instead of language region would also be preferable (Stadelmann-Steffen & Freitag, 2011).

The availability of panel data made our empirical analyses possible. On the one hand, repeated observations over time are crucial in controlling for time-invariant omitted variables, which are very likely to bias the link between associational involvement and political attitudes. On the other hand, we could only interpret the stronger effects detected in Latin cantons because the level of political involvement of newcomers before joining and the average

level of political engagement of the individuals they interact with once inside associations are measurable.

The external validity of these results may be limited by the peculiarity of the Swiss case. However, we can suppose that similar democratic equalizing effects appear in states with a similar federal structure or whenever an association has a centralized structure that guarantees a relative homogeneity in the internal dynamics of local chapters, and when such local chapters are active in geographic contexts characterized by the different political practices of average citizens. Large associations such as the Sierra Club may satisfy these two conditions (Baggetta et al., 2013).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are based on the Swiss Household Panel (SHP). Researchers can have access to the data after signing an individual user contract with the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS): <https://forscenter.ch/projects/swiss-household-panel/data/>.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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