

WHO WANTS WHAT FROM THE WELFARE STATE?

Socio-structural cleavages in distributional politics: evidence from Swiss referendum votes

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates socio-structural cleavages in relation to social policies in Switzerland. It examines the extent to which vertical stratification, age and gender explain variation in individual social policy preferences. We use survey data on reported voting behaviour in 22 direct democratic referendums on distributional issues between 1981 and 2004. Our two main findings are the following: (1) age seems to be the most relevant line of conflict in most distributional issues and (2) vertical stratification (income and education) and gender are less important in explaining individual voting decisions. Our data also suggest that material interests based on socio-structural characteristics account for only part of the variation in social policy preferences, and that value cleavages are also important.

Key words: welfare states; social policy preferences; generational cleavage; class cleavage; Switzerland

1. Introduction

Research on individual social policy preferences has highlighted a number of socio-structural cleavages as determinants. Studies investigating public opinion on the various redistributive schemes that make up today's welfare states have shown the relevance of class-related factors such as income or education as key explanatory variables (Ferrera 1993; Taylor-Gooby 1995, 1998; Svallfors 1997). More recent studies, however, have suggested that other factors are also likely to play a role. Among these, the most important are age, gender, and individual values (Roller 2000, 2002;

Deitch 2004; Armington 2006). The scenario that emerges from the existing literature is one of multiple intersecting cleavages, but it remains unclear what today is the relative weight and specific impact of each of these cleavages.

In addition, studies on policy preferences with regard to distributional issues suffer from a key weakness: they rely on survey data. Individual responses to questions asked in public opinion surveys are problematic for several reasons (Gaxie 1990; Kangas 1995; Berclaz 2002). Respondents may not be familiar with the subject of the survey or may not have an opinion on the question asked. Questions tend to be rather general, whereas people hold specific opinions on particular policies. In addition, researchers have pointed out the existence of a pro-altruism bias, or a tendency to reply in a 'politically correct' manner (Taylor-Gooby 1998).

Against this background, our objective is to examine the structure of social policy preferences on the basis of reported voting behaviour in direct democratic referendums on social policy reforms. Switzerland has a strong tradition of referendums since 1848.¹ The paper analyses voting patterns in 22 referendums on distributional issues that took place between 1981 and 2004. These include a variety of proposals going from lowering the age of retirement to cutting unemployment benefits or introducing a brand new maternity insurance scheme. Using multivariate logistic regression analysis, we assess the relative importance of the various putative cleavages.

Data on reported voting behaviour is not unproblematic, either. Turnout is socially structured: non-nationals (about 20 percent of the Swiss population) are barred from voting and, as in other democracies, participation is related to age and education levels. We have tested empirically for this possible bias where possible. However, this new referendum-data does have a particular value: voting behaviour reflects actual decisions, often informed by public debates. It can be seen as a rather solid indicator of what people want from the welfare state. Therefore, data on reported voting behaviour can usefully complement our knowledge in this field.

An additional caveat concerns the country where the referendums have taken place. Switzerland is rather unique among western democracies in several respects: consensus-democratic political institutions have forged a tradition of consensual policy-making. In addition, in international comparison, the overall level of material wellbeing has been high

1. The Swiss constitution makes provision for various types of referendums. Constitutional change can be put forward by means of a 'popular initiative', backed by 100,000 signatures. Voters can also challenge at the polls any act passed by parliament, if they are able to produce 50,000 signatures to that effect.

throughout the twentieth century. One might think that economic affluence may weaken the salience of the economic (class) conflict in comparison with other countries, and thereby affect our results. However, social stratification on income and education is even higher in Switzerland than in most continental European countries, and party-positions on economic welfare issues are as polarized as in the neighbouring countries (Bornschieer 2007). Hence, the distribution of preferences in Switzerland should not be completely idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, given the particular consensus-democratic institutional framework, our findings may not necessarily apply to other democracies.

2. Theoretical framework: conflict lines in social policy making

Social policy preferences may be structured by a number of cleavages. For the sake of conceptual clarity and in response to data limitation problems, we focus our investigation on a set of hypotheses based on a simple utility-maximising reasoning. In other words, we expect social groups to support policies that bring them advantages, and to oppose those, which bring them material costs. In so doing, we do not claim that differences in values and norms are irrelevant for people's preferences. On the contrary, as will be seen below, we even interpret the inability of utility-maximisation-based hypotheses to account for some of our findings as an indication that values matter. However, questions on personal values have been asked only in the latest post-referendum surveys, so that with our data we cannot deal directly with the issue of the impact of values. Hence, the focus of this article is clear: how far can we go in explaining individual social policy preferences with a simple utility-maximization assumption?

On the basis of existing scholarship we identify three crucial cleavages supposed to shape social policy preferences: vertical stratification, age and gender.

2.1. Vertical stratification as the main cleavage in social policy making

Traditionally, redistributive social policies have widely been understood as the result of the mobilisation of economically disadvantaged groups. In most cases, these groups could be equated with the working class (Stephens 1979; Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1985). In addition, as pointed out by Peter Baldwin, other disadvantaged groups, such as farmers in the Nordic countries, have occasionally joined forces with industrial workers (Baldwin 1990). Overall, the hypothesis implied by this

strand of literature is that on most distributional issues, the main cleavage line will be vertical stratification based on material resources. Quite simply, lower income groups are expected to be more supportive of redistributive measures, because they are the ones who can expect to gain most.

Subsequent research, however, has questioned the unique role of vertical stratification in structuring welfare state conflicts. With regard to the Nordic welfare states, some authors argue that welfare states are also the result of an alliance between the middle and the lower classes and of class compromise (Baldwin 1990; Swenson 2002; Palier 2003). Finally, authors such as van Kersbergen (1995) and Manow (2002) have insisted on religious actors as drivers of reform and main allies of the working class.

This literature shows that welfare states are not simply the result of vertically structured class conflict. Nevertheless, all these authors do emphasize the role of the materially most disadvantaged groups as a consistently pro-welfare force in industrial welfare states. For the purpose of this paper, we thus include income and educational stratification as socio-structural determinants in the analysis, and we expect people in social strata that are less endowed with those resources to be more supportive of redistributive measures than people in higher strata.

2.2. A generational conflict over resource allocation?

The debate on a generational conflict over the allocation of resources has made its appearance in the 1980s, first in the United States. According to some commentators, the pro-elderly bias of the welfare state, coupled with population ageing, will result in increasingly large transfers from the working age to the retired population. The pro-elderly bias is probably the unintended result of welfare state design choices made several decades ago (Lynch 2006). However, in the ongoing era of welfare state restructuring, the age bias of social policy reinforces the stakes that older age groups have in the welfare state. Assuming an interest-led rational voting behaviour, older voters should be particularly inclined to preserve the high level of social entitlements achieved during the post-war years (Longman 1987; Thurow 1996).

More systematic research carried out in subsequent years has provided substantial evidence that the generational divide increasingly constitutes a cleavage over the allocation of resources. Pampel, for instance, found that the pro-aged bias in social policies depended very much on the interest representation system of different countries: in the US, issue-based representation encourages fragmentation including along generational lines (Pampel 1994). Poterba, studying spending on education in the US

over the 1960–1990 period, found that increases in the proportion of the older population are a significant determinant of reductions in per-child educational spending (Poterba 1997). Hence, empirical studies increasingly confirm the thesis of generational competition in the allocation of public sector resources.

Finally, public opinion research on social policy preferences is also of relevance. Here, the age variable seems to play an important role. In general, older respondents favour more spending on programmes like pensions and health care, but less on education or unemployment benefit (Esping-Andersen 1999; Roller 2002; Armingeon 2006). The cleavage seems to be somewhat asymmetric, though: older people are less supportive of policies for the young, while the younger generations tend to be equally supportive of all policies. This can be explained with a simple interest-based hypothesis, making reference to the likelihood to be one day beneficiary of the relevant programme. There is little longitudinal research on these issues, but one study on Germany shows that an age cleavage in policy preferences over income guarantee programmes has emerged over the last few decades (Roller 2002).

Assuming an interest-based behaviour we can expect age groups to favour policies that benefit them. In addition, we can also expect an age cleavage to emerge more clearly in policies for the young, such as family policy or education, than in those benefiting older voters.

2.3. Gender as a cleavage line in distributional issues?

The study of gender-based divisions in attitudes towards welfare states is less developed than the study of age or economic cleavages. Political scientists have paid more attention to gender as a determinant of electoral behaviour, and have identified a gender gap: in a majority of advanced democracies women are today more likely to be left voters than men (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006), whereas they were more likely to be on the right during the post-war years.

Women's inclination to prefer left-wing parties is reflected in analyses of social policy preferences. Public opinion researchers have found a small but consistent gender gap in attitudes towards welfare state support in all western countries, with women being more supportive of social policies (Svallfors 1997; Deitch 2004; Armingeon 2006). The effect is weakened if one controls for class, party and union membership, but does not disappear. But how can we account theoretically for the gender gap in both voting behaviour and social policy preferences?

First, some authors have argued that socialization resulting from women's typical biography as primary care givers results in higher levels

of compassion, which is supposed to be associated with left-wing party support (Deitch 2004). This view, however, is incompatible with the change of direction in the gender gap. When women were more likely to be primary carers (the post-war years) they tended to be more conservative. In addition, women who are full time carers are presently less likely to be on the left than those who are involved in paid employment (Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

A second perspective puts more emphasis on a shift in women's material interests over the last 30–40 years. According to this view, women have shifted their social policy preferences in parallel with their increased propensity to engage in paid employment (Bonoli 2005). Women wishing to engage in paid employment can be expected to support social policies that facilitate female labour market participation, such as gender equality or childcare policies (Inglehart and Norris 2000; Iversen and Rosenbluth 2006).

A utility-maximising hypothesis would thus expect women who are involved in paid employment to support work and family life reconciliation policies; it would expect women who have chosen homemaking to support a more traditional form of family policy. Unfortunately our data does not allow us to distinguish between these two categories of women. We will thus simply hypothesise that women are more likely than men to support policies targeted on them.

3. Data and methods

Our analysis covers 22 referendums, which took place between 1985 and 2004 in the fields of old age pensions, labour market regulation and family policy.² These reforms were selected because they generally have clear distributional consequences for voters. In other words, it is relatively easy for voters to understand if they are likely to be winners or losers of these reforms.

Our data comes from the VOX surveys,³ which are carried out after every referendum vote. Respondents are asked how they voted as well as a series of socio-demographic and attitudinal questions. The number of respondents varies between about 800 in earlier surveys and about 1200 in more recent surveys.

2. During the period considered, 209 national votes were held. The full list of referendums is available at www.admin.ch/ch/f/pore/va/index.html

3. Brunner, Matthias, Hanspeter Kriesi and François Loréтан. *VoxIt: enquêtes post-votations standardisées (jeux de données informatiques)*. Production: SIDOS, Service Suisse d'information et d'archivage de données pour les sciences sociales, Neuchâtel. See www.sidos.ch for more information.

In the empirical analysis presented below, we included only the actual participants in the votes (on average about 55–60 percent of respondents) for two reasons: first, we want to exploit the advantage of referendum instead of general survey data. Therefore, it is important that we include the preferences of those people, who have actually made a concrete choice on a particular policy. And second, reform proposals are oftentimes rather complex issues and non-voters are far less informed on them than actual voters (Di Giacomo 1993). Therefore, the analyses presented in this article include only respondents who actually voted.

However, the choice to include only participants has also a downside, since turnout is socially structured: participation is strongly related to age, income and education level. Excluding people who abstained from voting reduces variation in these variables and may thus weaken our results. Until 1999 VOX data also include information on the opinions of non-voters. Hence, where available, we have also made the calculations for all respondents. However, we do not report the results in the article, since all the effects we find are confirmed and some even strengthened. Consequently, our choice to present results for participants only can be viewed as a conservative estimate of the effects.

For each vote we estimated logistic regression models where the individual voting decision (yes or no) is the dependent variable. Our independent variables reflect the cleavages we are interested in: gender, age and vertical stratification.

In relation to socio-economic stratification, we were confronted with data problems. The only stratification-variable, which is consistently available throughout the period is education. The sole use of education, however, may be problematic, since education not only reflects material aspects of stratification, but is also one of the main determinants of cultural values (Kitschelt 1994), which may offset the propensity to vote according to material interests. After 1993, household income is also available, and preferable for our purposes. For this reason, in the votes prior to 1993 we use education as a measure of stratification, and in those after that date, income.⁴

The inclusion of age in the models also proved problematic, because the expected shape of the relationship between age and support for redistribution depends on the precise features of the reform at stake. Support for more generous pensions may be linearly related to age, but approval for reductions in the age of retirement can be expected to be strongest among middle-aged people (40–65). In order to capture both

4. Income is operationalised by means of the following categories of monthly household earnings in Swiss francs: < 3000, 3001–5000, 5001–7000, 7001–9000, > 9001.

linear and non-linear relationships between age and voting behaviour, we used age categories, rather than a continuous age variable.

After careful consideration, we decided not to include the political orientation of respondents as a control variable in the main models. In fact, even though a variable on self-positioning on the left–right axis is available for several votes, its inclusion could have confused the analysis for several reasons. First, self-positioning on the left–right axis may depend on someone’s view on social policy, making it difficult to identify the direction of causality. Second, the left–right dimension reflects a variety of cleavages. Hence, one is unable to disentangle the exact meaning of a respondents’ self-positioning. We did nonetheless run models with left–right self-positioning as a robustness control, and we report the results where relevant.

4. An empirical analysis of referendum voting on social policy issues

The sample of referendums we analysed is rather heterogeneous, including votes in different policy areas. A joint analysis and discussion of all the 22 referendums is thus very difficult to interpret meaningfully. It can be nonetheless pointed out that of the three cleavages we are interested in, age comes out as a relevant division most frequently (in 18 out of 22 votes), followed by vertical stratification (seven out of 22) and gender (three out of 22).

4.1. Pension policy

During the period covered by this study, 10 referendums in the field of pension policy took place. All concerned the basic pension scheme, which is a universal, redistributive social insurance scheme. Five of them were about lowering the age of retirement; three were about bringing more funds to the scheme; one was about introducing gender equality; and one was about shifting the financing of the basic scheme from payroll taxes to an eco-tax.

Pension policy is an extremely promising field to compare the effects of different cleavages. In fact, we can develop clear hypotheses in relation to at least two of the cleavages. Regarding vertical stratification, lower income earners can be expected to support measures that strengthen the scheme, since they gain from its redistributive character. Higher income earners, in contrast, are likely to oppose such measures. Things are a bit more complex in relation to the age cleavage. We assume that measures that bring more finance to the pension scheme are going to be supported more

strongly by older people. The relationship between age and support for reductions in the age of retirement, instead, can be expected to have an inverted U shape, meaning that the middle aged (between 40 and 64) whose aspiration to quit the workforce is highest should be the strongest supporters. Younger people may not find the prospect of a lower retirement age so essential, and older people (aged 65+) can be expected to oppose reductions in the age of retirement, because this essentially means more competitors for pension resources. Finally, we do not expect a gender cleavage to emerge in pension policy issues, unless the reform is specifically about gender related aspects such as in referendum No. 9 (see Table 1b).

The first striking result is that age seems to be the main cleavage line in pension politics. In eight votes out of 10, age is a significant predictor of voting behaviour. Income stratification instead, is much less likely to be a significant determinant (three out of nine votes). As expected, gender does not generally foster conflict in pension politics. Even though the basic pension is strongly vertically redistributive, it today generates mostly generational rather than stratification-based cleavages.

This finding is confirmed by looking at more specific aspects of the analyses. Of particular interest are the five votes on reductions in the age of retirement. In all cases, older people (65+) are far less likely than young and middle-aged people to support such measures, and in three out of five cases the results are statistically significant. Our expectation was that middle aged voters are the staunchest supporters of reductions in the age of retirement. This indeed happens in the three most recent proposals (in one of them, the result is statistically significant). In the remaining two votes, middle aged people are less likely to support reductions in the age of retirement than younger people, but are more likely to do so than older people.

Household income, as expected, is negatively related to support for a lower age of retirement. This is understandable, since high-income groups in Switzerland tend to rely on occupational and private pensions, and have less interest in a more generous basic pension scheme. The income effect, however, is considerably less strong than the age effect. It is in the expected direction in three votes, but in only one case (No. 5) do members of a higher income category support the reform significantly less than people of the next lower category.

If we now turn to measures designed to bring more funds to the basic pension, we find again a rather strong age effect. Older people (65+) are in general more likely to support increasing funds for pensions than other age groups. In two cases (No. 8 and No. 10), however, older people were less likely to support more funds. Vote No. 8 took place at the same time as vote No. 7 and was merely a less generous alternative. Opposition to more

TABLE 1a. Logistic regression: estimates of the odds of accepting pension reforms, 1988–2000

| vote n° year | Lowering of the age of retirement | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | 1 1988 | 2 1995 | 3 1998 | 4 2000 | 5 2000 |
| Sex | | | | | |
| Man | r | r | r | r | r |
| Woman | 0.964 | 1.106 | 1.621** | 1.234 | 1.286 |
| Age | | | | | |
| 18–39 | r | r | r | r | r |
| 40–64 | 0.714 | 0.895 | 1.867** | 1.145 | 1.124 |
| 65 and older | 0.197*** | 0.605 | 0.81 | 0.46** | 0.492** |
| Vertical stratification | | | | | |
| Income | | 0.825 | 1.069 | 0.9 | 0.822* |
| Low level of education (mandatory school) | r | | | | |
| Medium level of education (secondary school) | 0.793 | | | | |
| High level of education (tertiary school) | 0.498 | | | | |
| (constant) | 0.887 | 0.672 | 0.335*** | 1.031 | 1.484 |
| Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.077 | 0.019 | 0.064 | 0.046 | 0.048 |
| N observations | 632 | 357 | 540 | 462 | 465 |

Figures shown are the odds ratios of the chance to vote yes to the reform as compared to vote no or blank. *** = significant at the 0.001 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level; r = reference category.

funds in this case may simply have meant support for the more generous alternative.⁵ Vote No. 10 was about using an ecotax to (partly) replace payroll taxes as a source of finance for the basic pension. Survey data shows that it was overwhelmingly perceived as an environmental measure rather than a way to bring extra finance to the pension scheme (Zürcher *et al.* 2002). This helps to explain the absence of an age cleavage.

Income stratification, instead, seems less relevant for the assignment of extra funds to the basic pension. Again, given the strong redistributive character of the scheme, we would expect lower income groups to favour

5. Both referendums were about how to spend some 20 bn CHF resulting from the sale of part of the National bank's gold reserves. Referendum No. 7 proposed assigning the whole sum to the basic pension, whereas referendum No. 8 was about sharing the windfall among the basic pension, a solidarity foundation and the cantons.

TABLE 1b. Logistic regression: estimates of the odds of accepting the reforms, 1993–2001

| vote n° year | <i>More funds to basic pension</i> | | | <i>Gender equality</i> | <i>Ecotax</i> |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|---------------|
| | 6 1993 | 7 2002 | 8 2002 | 9 1995 | 10 2001 |
| Sex | | | | | |
| Man | r | r | r | r | r |
| Woman | 0.994 | 1.03 | 1.081 | 0.83 | 1.252 |
| Age | | | | | |
| 18–39 | r | r | r | r | r |
| 40–64 | 0.989 | 1.591* | 0.512** | 0.795 | 0.962 |
| 65 and older | 2.436** | 2.429*** | 0.774 | 1.981* | 0.642 |
| Vertical stratification | | | | | |
| Income | 1.289** | 1.028 | 0.958 | 1.218* | 1.207 |
| (constant) | 0.743 | 0.388** | 1.192 | 0.787 | 0.138*** |
| Pseudo R2 | 0.042 | 0.03 | 0.029 | 0.044 | 0.029 |
| (Nagelkerke) | | | | | |
| N observations | 546 | 509 | 497 | 375 | 391 |

Figures shown are the odds ratios of the chance to vote yes to the reform as compared to vote no or blank. *** = significant at the 0.001 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level; r = reference category.

such measures. However, income is significantly related to voting behaviour on only one occasion (vote No. 6), and in the opposite direction.

The votes on increased funding are of particular interest, because they contain both left-wing and right-wing solutions to the problem of financing pensions. Vote No. 6 was about increasing VAT by one percentage point for the basic pension scheme. This governmental proposal was supported by all major parties. In the referendum, however, support for it came predominately from left-wing voters. Vote No. 7, instead, was about assigning to the basic pension some CHF 20 billion resulting from the sale of gold by the National bank, and was put forward by a right-wing party. In the referendum, it was mostly supported by right-wing voters. What is intriguing, however, is that old age (65+) remains a statistically significant predictor of voting behaviour in both cases, even when controlling for self-positioning on the left right axis (models not shown).

Finally, in line with our expectations, this set of votes does not show any clear evidence of a strong gender cleavage in pension policy issues. Vote No. 9, which introduced gender equality, was in fact a mixed blessing for women. While introducing contribution credits for child rearing and

contribution sharing between spouses, these measures were also coupled with an increase from 62 to 64 in women's age of retirement. This helps to explain the absence of a significant gender cleavage. Vote No. 3, instead, which was about bringing back women's age of retirement to 62, was undoubtedly beneficial to women, and indeed saw a stronger prevalence of yes votes among female voters.

The analysis of voting behaviour in pension policy issues suggests that the main cleavage in this field of social policy is age. Measures aimed at extending coverage to younger age groups are forcefully and consistently opposed by older voters (65+). In addition, it emerges that the prevalence of interest-based voting is very strong among groups defined by age, and somewhat less so among groups defined by income level.

4.2. Labour market policy

Eight reforms of labour market policy have taken place between 1985 and 2003. They can be easily divided into two groups according to the main aim of the proposals. Three votes were popular initiatives on working time reductions (such as introducing a 35-hour week) (Nos 11–13) and five votes were about labour market deregulation (Nos 14–18).

With regard to age, we expect retirees to oppose social policy expansion in favour of working age generations. With regard to the young and the middle-aged, however, hypotheses are more difficult to formulate. On the one hand, the middle-aged can be expected to be particularly favourable towards working time reductions and labour market protection because it is harder for them to re-enter the labour market. On the other hand, the young are likely to be the staunchest supporters of such measures, because they are the ones who will have to stay longer in the labour market. It is an empirical question, which of these two age groups will be most favourable to these bills.

Hypotheses on expected income and gender cleavages are somewhat less straightforward, notably because unemployment protection, labour law and labour time regulation are not very redistributive, and generally apply to all labour market participants in the same way. However, the lower income groups are more vulnerable and should thus support workers' protection and labour time reductions more strongly than higher income groups. Finally, women could tend to be more favourable to labour protection, since they are also more vulnerable in the labour market.

Again, the impact of age is the most consistent result with regard to working time (Table 2). The oldest age category, retired people (65+), was consistently and highly significantly less likely to support working

TABLE 2a. Logistic regression: estimates of the odds of accepting labour market reforms, 1985-2002

| vote <i>n</i> ^o year | Lowering of working time | | |
|--|--------------------------|------------|------------|
| | 11 1985 | 12 1988 | 13 2002 |
| Sex | | | |
| Man | r | r | r |
| Woman | 0.841 | 0.933 | 0.694 |
| Age | | | |
| 18–39 | r | r | r |
| 40–64 | 0.462** | 0.741 | 0.861 |
| 65 and older | 0.306*** | 0.451** | 0.307*** |
| Vertical stratification | | | |
| Income | | | 0.994 |
| Low level of education (mandatory school) | r | r | |
| Medium level of education (secondary school) | 0.591 | 1.153 | |
| High level of education (tertiary school) | 1.053 | 1.566 | |
| (constant) | 1.728 | 0.492* | 0.402* |
| Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.07 | 0.034 | 0.05 |
| N observations | 340 | 674 | 607 |

Figures shown are the odds ratios of the chance to vote yes to the reform as compared to vote no or blank. *** = significant at the 0.001 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level; r = reference category.

time reductions than the youngest (18–39). The impact of age seems to be nearly linear, since the middle-aged also tended to reject the reduction in working time more often than the young. Part of the voting behaviour of the oldest generation can be explained by them being more conservative, but the effects remains identical when controlling for left-right self-positioning (results not shown).

Vertical stratification, by contrast, has no consistent impact in the referendums dealing with the lowering of working time. Education generally accounts for only minor differences and in 1988 the higher educated were even more favourable to lowering working time than those with low and intermediate education. This effect, however, is not significant and remains the same when controlling for left-right self-positioning, which might indicate that education probably captures values as much as material interest. Income has no significant effect on voting behaviour, which might be explained by the fact that working time regulation affects all labour market participants in the same way. It is

TABLE 2b. Logistic regression: estimates of the odds of accepting labour market reforms, 1995–2002

| vote n° year | <i>Labour market liberalization (reduction in employment protection and unemployment benefits)</i> | | | | |
|--|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | 14 1995 | 15 1996 | 16 1997 | 17 1998 | 18 2002 |
| Sex | | | | | |
| Man | r | r | r | r | r |
| Woman | 1.329 | 0.992 | 0.567** | 0.694 | 0.943 |
| Age | | | | | |
| 18–39 | r | r | r | r | r |
| 40–64 | 1.242 | 1.958** | 1.217 | 1.080 | 1.258 |
| 65 and older | 1.489 | 1.693 | 2.806*** | 1.742* | 1.995** |
| Vertical stratification | | | | | |
| Income | | 1.263* | 1.180* | 1.174 | 1.072 |
| Low level of education (mandatory school) | r | | | | |
| Medium level of education (secondary school) | 1.675 | | | | |
| High level of education (tertiary school) | 2.248* | | | | |
| (constant) | 1.611 | 0.147*** | 0.407** | 0.738 | 0.595 |
| Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.026 | 0.041 | 0.076 | 0.033 | 0.019 |
| N observations | 509 | 502 | 521 | 425 | 473 |

Figures shown are the odds ratios of the chance to vote yes to the reform as compared to vote no or blank. *** = significant at the 0.001 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level; r = reference category.

probably for similar reasons that gender has no significant impact on these issues either. These results suggest that the split between the active and the retired generations has become the structuring conflict line in working time politics.

The emerging picture is similar with regard to employment protection legislation. In four out of five votes, the oldest age group was the staunchest supporter of a reduction of workers' protection or cutbacks in unemployment protection. In the 1990s and 2000s, the retired were about two to three times more likely to support liberalization than the young. The impact of age is again linear, the middle-aged being somewhat (though mostly insignificantly) more open to labour market liberalization than the youngest generation. This result is robust when we control for left-right self-positioning: in two out of four votes, the odds of the oldest generation to

accept liberalization remain significantly lower than those of the young (results not shown). The only exception is the 1996 vote on labour law, when the middle-aged were even more favourable to the bill than the old. This vote was particularly controversial because it would have allowed Sunday openings for shops, a highly symbolic measure, whose tradition-breaking nature made it unacceptable to large sections of older voters.

In addition, it can be observed that the more highly educated and higher income groups were significantly more inclined to accept retrenchment and cutbacks in labour protection, even though this effect weakened after 1998. Hence, there is an effect of vertical stratification on the preferences with regard to labour market liberalization. The results are robust, but weaken considerably (i.e., become insignificant) when controlled for left-right positioning. Finally, women – whether on the right or on the left – tend to be more attached to workers' protection than men, particularly so in the 1997 labour law reform, in which men were twice as likely as women to accept labour market liberalization.

Overall, the age cleavage is again the most important socio-structural factor explaining voters' choices. The oldest age group (65+) consistently rejected working time reductions and was clearly more favourable to reductions in workers' protection than the active generations.

4.3. Family policy

The sample of votes on family policy issues is more homogeneous than previous ones, as all four votes were about the introduction of maternity insurance (Switzerland lacked a mandatory maternity insurance until 2004).

Most obviously, one might expect stronger support for maternity insurance by women compared to men. In fact, except in the event of adoption, men could not directly benefit from any of the four schemes proposed. At the same time, however, the impact of gender could be blurred by the fact that only younger women can potentially benefit from maternity insurance and thus be more inclined to support the introduction of this scheme. Controlling for age does not help here, because it does not allow us to distinguish between the voting behaviour of women within different age groups. For this reason, we also ran models using an interaction term to test the propensity of young women to support maternity insurance.

Finally, hypotheses on the impact of vertical stratification are not straightforward, either. On the one hand, one could expect a strong impact, because lower income groups are most dependent on income replacement from maternity insurance. On the other hand, employment rates and hence the likelihood of relying on maternity insurance, are

higher among highly educated women. Theoretical reasoning alone does not allow us to produce a clear-cut hypothesis. Hence, the issue must be settled empirically.

It is most interesting to note that gender does not consistently structure the voting behaviour on family policy (Table 3). Indeed, only in one out of four models do women support maternity insurance more than men. The differences between male and female votes are insignificant in all other referendums. To some extent, this may be due to the fact that people think in terms of household income. A man living with a woman who interrupts employment because of maternity will be better off if a maternity scheme exists.

With regard to the link between age and gender, we hypothesised that young women would be the most favourable to maternity protection of all socio-structural groups. We have tested this hypothesis by introducing an interaction term in the model (results not shown). Young women are

TABLE 3. Logistic regression: estimates of the odds of accepting the introduction of maternity insurance, 1984–2004

| <i>vote n°</i> <i>year</i> | <i>Maternity insurance</i> | | | |
|---|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>19</i> <i>1984</i> | <i>20</i> <i>1987</i> | <i>21</i> <i>1999</i> | <i>22</i> <i>2004</i> |
| Sex | | | | |
| Man | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> |
| Woman | 0.885 | 1.688** | 0.963 | 0.714 |
| Age | | | | |
| 18–39 | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> |
| 40–64 | 0.410** | 0.578*** | 0.411*** | 0.807 |
| 65 and older | 0.275*** | 0.876 | 0.357*** | 0.362*** |
| Vertical stratification | | | | |
| Income | | | 1.014 | 1.027 |
| Low level of education (mandatory school) | <i>r</i> | <i>r</i> | | |
| Medium level of education (secondary school) | 0.503* | 0.891 | | |
| High level of education (tertiary school) | 1.311 | 3.359*** | | |
| (constant) | 0.789 | 0.491** | 1.391 | 3.954*** |
| Pseudo R2 (Nagelkerke) | 0.112 | 0.095 | 0.053 | 0.06 |
| N observations | 342 | 617 | 581 | 531 |

Figures shown are the odds ratios of the chance to vote yes to the reform as compared to vote no or blank. *** = significant at the 0.01 level; ** = significant at the 0.01 level; * = significant at the 0.05 level; *r* = reference category.

indeed more likely than the rest of the population to support maternity insurance, but in none of the cases significantly so.

Age again provides more consistent results in terms of our rational utility-maximising assumptions. In all four referendums, age has a significant effect on the odds of approval for maternity insurance. Generally, the youngest generation was two to three times more likely to approve the bills than the middle aged and the oldest generation of people (65 and older). This negative effect of age on the odds of approval holds stable when we control for left–right self-positioning and becomes insignificant only in the last referendum in 2004. Hence, the effect of age is only partly due to the more conservative profile of older persons. Even among ideologically like-minded persons, the elderly reject those policies more clearly than the young.

In the 1987 vote, however, the middle aged were more sceptical against the bill than the oldest age category, contrary to our expectation of a linear relation between age and approval. This can tentatively be explained by the fact that this bill was strongly supported by the government, the federal parliament and all four governmental parties. Older voters are, in general, more likely to follow the position of the government and this high level of unanimity may explain the unusual approval rate among the oldest generation.

Finally, income effects are negligible. The different income groups displayed very similar patterns of voting behaviour.

The only interest-based effect in this field is related to age. Income and gender on the other hand, seem to have no effect on policy preferences with regard to maternity insurance. As suggested in the introduction, we may see here the limits of a rational-choice model of voting decisions: social policy dealing with family models is, of course, strongly value-laden. Our data does not allow us to test value-based hypotheses, but our results suggest that these may help explain voting behaviour.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed the extent to which socio-structural characteristics, such as vertical stratification, age and gender, influence voting behaviour on redistributive social policy issues. We have started with very straightforward, rationalistic hypotheses, i.e., we expected a conflict line to appear if the bill proposal in question had diverging distributional effects for different age, gender or income categories.

This hypothesis is most strikingly confirmed in relation to age. In eight out of 10 votes on pension policy, in seven out of eight referendums on labour market policy and in four out of four votes on maternity insurance,

age was a relevant and significant predictor of voting behaviour. The direction of the age effect is almost always consistent with a rational utility-maximising behaviour. Even after controlling for self-positioning on the left–right axis – elderly people being more conservative – age remains in most cases a significant predictor and the direction of the effect does not change. Older generations not only massively approve improvements in the benefits they receive, but they also tend to reject social policy proposals aimed at improving the situation of the actively employed and of young families. The votes on labour market policies most clearly show the turning point at the age of retirement. People of the age of 65 and more significantly reject working time reductions and approve labour market deregulation, whereas the active generations between 18 and 64 do not differ significantly in their voting behaviour. The importance of the age cleavage in contemporary opinion formation on social policy issues is the most important and most consistent result of this article.

Vertical stratification, by contrast, has a relevant effect on social policy preferences only with regard to certain issues, most clearly so with regard to labour market liberalization, of which higher income-strata are more supportive than the less privileged.

But why is utility maximising voting stronger in relation to age than in relation to income? One hypothesis may be that it is more straightforward to ascertain one's position in relation to the former than to the latter. Ideas on social mobility blur the estimations of costs and benefits people may make regarding the effects of social policy on their income and socio-structural status. In addition, the welfare state itself has contributed to the weakening of class-consciousness. With regard to age, by contrast, the calculation is easier, especially from the view of the elderly: a retired person will never again rely on labour market regulation, unemployment benefits or family policy. Hence, cost–benefit calculations are more straightforward and rational decision-making plays out more directly in individual decisions.

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Appendix A

List of referendums

22 referendums on distributional conflicts 1984–2004

| No | Date | VOX No | Title (PI = popular initiative) | Content | % yes |
|----|-----------------|-----------|---|---|-------|
| 1 | June 12th, 1988 | 352 | PI 'on lowering the retirement age to 62/60' | Lowering of retirement age to 62 for men and 60 for women | 35.1% |
| 2 | Nov 28th, 1993 | 513 | Federal bill on the stabilisation of the social insurance schemes | Increase of the VAT by 1 percentage point earmarked for pensions | 62.6% |
| 3 | June 25th, 1995 | 571 | Federal law on old age insurance AHV (revision) | Splitting of pension contributions, increase of women's retirement age | 60.7% |
| 4 | June 25th, 1995 | 572 | PI 'for an expansion of pension and disability insurance coverage' | Lowering of retirement age | 27.6% |
| 5 | Sept 27th, 1998 | 643 | PI 'for the 10th revision of AHV without an increase in the retirement age' | Lowering of women's retirement age back to 60 (after vote No 3) | 41.5% |
| 6 | Nov 26th, 2000 | 721 | PI 'for a flexibilisation of the basic pension scheme' | Lowering of retirement age | 39.5% |
| 7 | Nov 26th, 2000 | 722 | PI 'for a flexible retirement age at 62 for men and women' | Lowering of retirement age and ecotax for financing of pensions | 46.0% |
| 8 | Dec 2nd, 2001 | 752 | PI 'for a stable pension scheme – taxing energy instead of work' | Ecotax to finance basic pensions | 22.9% |
| 9 | Sept 22nd, 2002 | 781 | PI 'excess gold for pension funds' | Excess gold of National Bank to be transferred to the basic pension scheme | 47.6% |
| 10 | Sept 22nd, 2002 | 782 | Alternative proposal to the PI 781 | Excess gold of National Bank to be shared between a solidarity foundation, the pension scheme and the cantons | 46.4% |
| 11 | Mar 10th, 1985 | 251 | PI 'for longer paid holidays' | Statutory right to 4 or 5 weeks of paid holidays (depending on age) | 34.8% |
| 12 | Dec 4th, 1988 | 362 | PI 'for the lowering of working time' | Introduction of the 40-hours working week | 34.3% |
| 13 | Mar 3rd, 2002 | 762 | PI 'for a shorter working week' | Introduction of the 40-hours working week | 25.4% |
| 14 | Sept 26th, 1993 | 505 | Federal bill on measures in unemployment insurance | Cuts in unemployment benefits and extension of their duration | 70.4% |

Appendix A (Continued)

| No | Date | VOX No | Title (PI = popular initiative) | Content | % yes |
|----|-----------------|--------|---|---|-------|
| 15 | Dec 1st, 1996 | 602 | Federal labour law (revision) | Limited opening of shops on Sundays, allowing women's night work, more flexible conditions for night work | 33.0% |
| 16 | Sept 28th, 1997 | 622 | Federal bill on unemployment insurance financing | Cuts in unemployment benefits | 49.2% |
| 17 | Nov 29th, 1998 | 654 | Federal labour law (revision) | Allowing women's night work, more flexible conditions for night work | 63.5% |
| 18 | Nov 24th, 2002 | 792 | Federal law on unemployment insurance (revision) | Cuts in unemployment benefits | 56.1% |
| 19 | Dec 2nd, 1984 | 241 | PI 'for an effective protection of mothers' | Paid maternity leave | 15.8% |
| 20 | Dec 6th, 1987 | 342 | Federal law on health insurance (revision) | Health insurance reform with paid maternity leave | 28.7% |
| 21 | June 13th, 1999 | 685 | Federal law on maternity insurance (introduction) | Paid maternity leave for working mothers, birth benefits for all mothers | 39.0% |
| 22 | Sept 28th, 2004 | 854 | Federal law on the income replacement scheme (revision) | Paid maternity leave for working mothers | 55.5% |

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