POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN DIRECT DEMOCRATIC CAMPAIGNS

ENLIGHTENING OR MANIPULATING?

EDITED BY HANSPETER KRIESI

Political Communication in Direct Democratic Campaigns
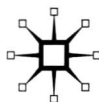
Enlightening or Manipulating?

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Political Communication in Direct Democratic Campaigns

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The series 'Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century' was initiated by the Swiss National Center of Competence in Research *NCCR Democracy,* an interdisciplinary research program launched by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the University of Zurich in 2005. The program examines how globalization and mediatization challenge democracy today (www.nccr-democracy.uzh.ch).

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Democracy faces substantial challenges as we move into the 21st Century. The West faces malaise; multi-level governance structures pose democratic challenges; and the path of democratization rarely runs smoothly. This series examines democracy across the full range of these contemporary conditions. It publishes innovative research on established democracies, democratizing polities and democracy in multi-level governance structures. The series seeks to break down artificial divisions between different disciplines, by simultaneously drawing on political communication, comparative politics, international relations, political theory, and political economy.

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the result of a joint project of three groups of researchers at the University of Zurich – two groups of communication scientists and a group of political scientists. The three cooperated together in the framework of the Swiss research program on the Challenges of Democracy in the 21st Century. As all those who have already tried it know, interdisciplinary research is not easy, even if the researchers involved come from neighbouring disciplines as did our three teams. Each discipline has its own concepts, approaches and disciplinary culture, which not only influence the way its practitioners prefer to work, but also affect such details as the way they present their results. Political communication is an area of research located at the crossroads of political science and communication science, and it is quite obvious that its study should give rise to the kind of cooperation as the one this book is based upon. However, more often than not, even in this particular field, studies remain confined by disciplinary boundaries. It was the Swiss research program on democracy – the National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) Democracy – which made this interdisciplinary effort possible. It provided the opportunity for us to develop an integrated approach to political communication – a common language and a common approach to its study, which we hope will be of some interest to the students of political communication from different disciplinary origins.

This book is a study of political communication in Swiss direct-democratic campaigns. It is predicated on the assumption that direct-democratic campaigns constitute an especially useful setting for studying political communication. Compared to electoral choices, direct-democratic choices have the considerable advantage that the object of the choice is closely circumscribed. It is an issue-specific choice, which is presented to the voters in a binary format; that is, the voters' attention is focused on a straightforward task. Given its binary format, a direct-democratic campaign usually pits two coalitions against each other. Moreover, such a campaign usually has a clear beginning, and typically ends with the vote, and it consists of a narrowly circumscribed time interval, which is characterized by an exceptional intensification of political communication. In other words, a direct-democratic campaign comes close to a natural experiment in a quasi-laboratory setting. Swiss direct democratic campaigns are of particular relevance because, apart from providing a quasi-experimental setting for the study of political communication, they have the additional advantage that the Swiss setting constitutes the paradigmatic case for direct democratic votes – the setting that is currently emulated by an ever-increasing number of countries.

In its 1996 Christmas issue, the *Economist* had this vision: 'The coming century could see, at last, the full flowering of the idea of democracy.' It suggested that the 'half-finished thing' of democracy in the twentieth century could grow to its full height; it could grow to include the people in the political decision-making process. We believe that, in many ways, such a development could benefit from the experience of the Swiss with direct-democratic procedures, and we think that it is of particular relevance to learn how political communication works in this paradigmatic case.

Our research and the preparation of this book have benefited from the support of many colleagues. In the framework of NCCR Democracy, we have been closely supervised by a group of experts who provided constructive criticism and support. In particular, we would like to thank Robert Entman and Adrienne Héritier for their helpful advice. At different occasions, we have presented our ideas and preliminary results to colleagues who provided us with their comments and critiques. Among them are the group of colleagues around Christopher Green-Pedersen at the University of Aarhus (Rune Slothus, Rune Stubager, and Peter Mortensen), James Druckman, Hans Mathias Kepplinger, Jan Kleinnijenhuis, and Paul Sniderman. We are also very grateful to all the politicians, campaign managers, public officials, journalists, and newspaper editors who were willing to give us some of their precious time to answer our questions. We would like to thank the Swiss Federal Chancellor, Oswald Sigg, for the support he lent to our study. We are equally grateful to the members of our three survey samples who have been willing to answer our detailed questions in up to three panel waves. The cooperation of all these people has allowed us to put together a truely exceptional data set, without which we would not have been able to implement our integrated approach. Last but certainly not least, we would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation and the University of Zurich, who jointly finance NCCR Democracy, of which this study is a part.

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