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Should we stay or should we join? 30 years of Sovereignism and direct democracy in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Sovereignism is on the rise. Defending a nation's political autonomy, fortifying its international borders, preserving cultural identity and shielding the domestic economy from the adverse effects of globalization are core demands. Often contained within research on populism or Euroscepticism, this article conceptualizes Sovereignism as an ideology on its own. Three separate, yet connected, dimensions of Sovereignism are distilled: political, which negates sharing ultimate decision-making with supranational bodies; economic, which concerns market access and trade liberalization; and cultural, which regards foreign citizens as a threat to national culture. Empirically, we track the impact of sovereigntist arguments on citizens' voting behaviour, by analysing all 68 referendums held in Switzerland between 1983 and 2016 concerning supranational integration, economic ties, immigration, asylum and/or cultural demarcation. We rely on a multilevel analysis of post-vote survey replies to show how the three dimensions interact with party politics, values and contextual factors. Our main finding is that all three dimensions of Sovereignism continue to matter, but that values and party politics have in the meantime absorbed a big part of their impact.

KEYWORDS


Sovereignism; populism; Switzerland; direct democracy; referendum

Introduction

In November 2018, Swiss voters rejected a constitutional amendment entitled 'Swiss Law Instead of Foreign Judges (Self-Determination Initiative)'.¹ If accepted, the Swiss constitution would have taken precedence over international law and jurisprudence (except *jus cogens*); conflicting international treaties would have had to be renegotiated and, if necessary, cancelled. Furthermore, the Federal Tribunal would only have been permitted to consider international agreements that had passed the optional referendum test, which is, for example, not the case for the European Convention on Human Rights (BR 2017, p. 5405). Launched by the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) and ultimately defeated, this specific proposal nevertheless throws into sharp focus the much wider issue of Sovereignism as

- An ideology protecting and defending a state's sovereignty against supranationalism and global constitutionalism (Rensmann, 2016)

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- A critique of (the expansion of) international law as lacking democratic credentials on procedural grounds: unelected and foreign judges, obscure and distant bureaucrats (Pollack, 2017)
- A critique of the substance of trans-national law as contradicting national political culture and values, based on the presumed particularity of one's own legal regime (Resnick, 2008, p. 35)
- A reaction to globalization, in general (Alles & Badie, 2016, p. 18), and the declining importance of state borders vis-à-vis goods, capital, services and workers, in particular (Kallis, 2018, p. 295ff.; Ivaldi & Mazzoleni, 2018; Helleiner & Pickel, 2005).

Consequently, defending a nation's political autonomy and independence, maintaining democracy domestically, strengthening state borders, preserving its cultural identity and shielding its economy from the adverse effects of globalization are core demands put forth by sovereigntists (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1262). Often contained within research on nationalism, right-wing populism or Euroscepticism, this article examines Sovereignism as an ideology on its own merits, although there remain significant conceptual and partisan overlaps (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017).

The next two sections define and conceptualize Sovereignism in general. Three dimensions in particular are distilled. The *political* dimension relates to sharing decision-making with supranational organizations such as the UN, the WTO or the EU. The *economic* dimension concerns trade liberalization, access to domestic and international markets, and labour rights. The *cultural* dimension refers to whether foreign nationals (including expats, asylum seekers, *sans papiers*, refugees and cross-border workers) are regarded as a threat, or as enrichment for the nation's cultural identity and community life.

Sections 3 and 4 focus on Sovereignism in Switzerland, a country at the heart of Europe with a rich tradition of referendums on all sorts of policy questions. We study the nature and evolution of Sovereignism through 68 referendums held between 1983 and 2016. All of them had to do with supranational integration, immigration, asylum, cultural demarcation and/or economic relations. So, unlike studies that analyse EU-related referendums only (Hobolt, 2009; Hug, 2002; Mendez et al., 2014), or which operationalize sovereignty more narrowly through international recognition and 'core competences of the state' (Mendez & Germann, 2018, p. 145), we widen both our empirical and our conceptual scope. This allows us to compare different policy issues related to Sovereignism and track citizen behaviour over more than 30 years, since such referendums occur quite regularly and within the same overall setting (all are binding and Swiss-wide). We then rely on a multilevel analysis of post-vote survey responses to specific arguments to show how the three dimensions interact with individual characteristics, party politics, populism, nationalism and context. The general question answered through this process is the following: Is there such a phenomenon as 'Sovereignism', meaning a set of interrelated opinions all defending a nation-state's political, economic and/or cultural sovereignty? And, more specifically: does it have an influence on individual voting behaviour?

Defining Sovereignism

Sovereignism is an ideology that places a nation-state's sovereignty above all else (Spiro, 2000, p. 9). Sovereignty here refers to the 'Westphalian' notion of 'territoriality and the

exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures', as well as full control over cross-border flows of 'goods, persons, pollutants, diseases and ideas' (Krasner, 1999, p. 12, 20). Sovereignists accept international agreements only if they serve to buttress ultimate and unrestricted decision-making by their citizens in and over their territory. Yet they are agnostic as to *how* citizens exert their sovereignty domestically, that is to say, via representative, majoritarian, federal and/or direct democracy (Resnik, 2008). Global, supranational and trans-national rules are found wanting both in content and procedure (Pollock, 2017). Consequently, by no means are sovereign powers to be transferred beyond the state (Goodhart & Bondanella Tanichev, 2011, p. 1049).

Sovereignism comes in two variants: principled and pragmatic.² For *principled* sovereignists, maintaining or restoring a state's *de facto* and *de jure* independence is the goal and not merely an instrument for achieving better policies. They firmly believe in 'the uncontested primacy of national-level politics' (Kallis, 2018, p. 299). In his latest speech at the UN, for example, Donald Trump (2018) put it thus: 'Sovereign and independent nations are the only vehicle where freedom has ever survived, democracy has ever endured or peace has ever prospered. And so, we must protect our sovereignty and our cherished independence above all'. Consequently, 'We will never surrender America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy. [...] We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism' (Trump, 2018).

Pragmatic sovereignists, in turn, are more selective, flexible and merely temporary sovereignists. They use sovereignist language to pursue either a libertarian, deregulatory agenda, if located on the political right (Moravcsik, 2000, p. 293, 301), or aim for as much protection of fundamental rights and socio-economic regulation as possible, if on the left (Pollock, 2017, p. 8). They object to international agreements and supranational institutions only for as long as these obstruct policies in line with their own preferences, and/or until such bodies have themselves become more inclusive, participatory and transparent (Pollock, 2017; Steger & Wilson, 2012).

Neoconservative sovereignists, for example, have no problem with enabling corporations to sue democratic governments for investment losses, but object to the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (Resnik, 2008). European Socialists, Greens and Liberals, in turn, have objected to trade and other agreements with the USA and Canada on the grounds of rights violations of EU citizens (Pollock, 2017, p. 8). Yet they want the EU to accede to the European Convention of Human Rights (e.g. European Parliament, 2016; cf. also Goodhart & Bondanella Tanichev, 2011, p. 1048). Similarly, in 1992 the Swiss Greens objected to the accession of Switzerland to the European Economic Area (Senti, 2012), as did the SVP, – but for entirely different reasons, namely on pragmatic grounds and not as a matter of principle (e.g. Bornschieer, 2010).

Right-wing populist parties are principled sovereignists. They oppose foreign standards *tout court* (Keohane et al., 2009, p. 3). In their analysis of 16 European populist parties and the US Republicans, as well as Trump's campaign speeches, De Spiegeleire et al. (2017, p. 76ff.) found that all 18 actors advocated 'taking back or maintaining national control of policy-making'. 17 actors wanted to 'reinstate or reinforce border controls' and 16 to 'increase national control over inter/supranational organizations', with the remaining parties not having a clear position. All but the Movimento Cinque Stelle are right-wing populists; left-wing populists such as Syriza and Podemos did not score sufficiently sovereignist to be analysed (De Spiegeleire et al. 2017, iv and personal correspondence).

Table 1 places principled Sovereignism alongside exclusive nationalism and right-wing populism, on the left, and market and justice globalism, on the right. The former two concepts are related in that they similarly use the inclusion-exclusion mechanism, although what is sealed off from outside interference is more the national community as opposed to state sovereignty, for the first, whereas right-wing populism excludes the ‘impure elite’ (both domestic and foreign) from the ‘pure people’ (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). The main enemies of principled Sovereignism are not other nations or foreigners (people), but rules: international standards and covenants, and especially tribunals such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), are seen as obstacles to the full realization of national self-determination. Trans-national law and its actors (e.g. the other 46 judges on the ECtHR) are not only alien, far away and ignorant, but also non-political, unelected and thus lacking democratic legitimacy (Benhabib, 2016, p. 126; Moravcsik, 2000, p. 306ff.), hence the label of ‘foreign judges’ used by the Swiss People’s Party when targeting the ECtHR through their ‘self-determination initiative’ (Schubarth, 2017; BR, 2017; also Keohane et al., 2009, pp. 21–22).

The right-hand side of **Table 1** displays two prominent, but antagonistic targets of Sovereignism. Market globalism refers to the neoliberal attempt to create a single, world-wide market for goods, services, capital, ideas and people, while justice globalism is equally encompassing in territorial reach but ‘place[s] the needs and rights of people before corporations [...] to secure a just and sustainable future for people and the planet’ (Steger & Wilson, 2012, p. 449). Pragmatic sovereigntists oppose *either* market or justice globalism, adducing *either* procedural reasons – such as lack of transparency – or substantive objections – such as not enough, or too much freedom for persons to move (Resnik, 2008; Pollock, 2017).

Both types of globalism conceive of humans as morally and legally equal individuals regardless of residence and citizenship (Benhabib, 2016, p. 113). Principled Sovereignism, in turn, regards every human as a member of just one political community: their nation-state (Goodhart & Bondanella Tanichev, 2011, p. 1050). Its plea is ‘for a retreat of nations into their borders’ (Alles & Badie, 2016, p. 18; also Kallis, 2018), and the obligations of government lie with ‘the majority of our own people’ only (cited in Moravcsik, 2000, p. 304). In sum, whereas globalism advocates a post-Westphalian understanding of equality of consumer or citizen rights and worldwide competition or solidarity, principled Sovereignism insists on separation into distinct states and national self-determination – ‘there can be no substitute for strong, sovereign, and independent nations’ (Trump, 2017).

Table 1. Sovereignism and four related but distinct concepts.

	Exclusive nationalism	Right-wing populism	Principled Sovereignism	Market globalism	Justice globalism
Primary reference	‘our’ nation	the people	‘our’ state	the market	justice
Key value	supremacy	purity	self-determination	competition	solidarity
Main enemy	other nations	elite (foreign/ domestic)	the supranational	(re-) regulation	corporations
Policy demand	less/no immigration	(more) direct democracy	supremacy of domestic rules	global free trade	global equality
View on borders		closed (for people)	closed (for rules)	open (for capital)	open (for people)

Right-wing populism, exclusive nationalism and principled Sovereignism often appear together, for example, in the presidency of Donald Trump, or during the Brexit campaign (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1266). Yet differences remain, most notably regarding policy demands (Table 1). Populists always argue in the name of the people, and hence defend or demand more ‘popular’ sovereignty, often in the form of referendums (Mudde, 2007, p. 151ff.; a notable exception being the US Republicans, cf. De Spiegeleire et al., 2017, p. 68). Sovereignists, by contrast, are satisfied with protecting ‘state’ sovereignty, leaving the precise mode of exercising it domestically open. For example, ‘taking back control’ during the Brexit campaign meant re-empowering the UK parliament, and not introducing direct democracy all around, which is precisely what the SVP claimed to defend ahead of the November 2018 vote. Nationalists, in turn, defend the supremacy of ‘our’ nation, and mainly want less or even no immigration. Little do they care, in principle, where the rules governing their community originate. For both sovereignists and nationalists, then, even a less than fully democratic regime would suffice if only it enabled effective resistance against the outside.

The agnostic position of principled Sovereignism towards democracy also becomes visible when contrasted with the right-hand side of Table 1. In fact, supranationalism *enhances* national democracy if it protects minorities, guarantees fundamental rights, enforces socio-economic security, contains vested interests and promotes deliberation (Keohane et al., 2009; Pollock, 2017; Resnik, 2008). Principled sovereignists may well acknowledge the limits of supposedly independent policy-making by their nation-state in the face of increasing globalization. Still, they object to internationally agreed solutions or those derived from the jurisprudence of other countries because they violate domestic sovereignty (Goodhart & Bondanella Tanichev, 2011, p. 1065; Resnik, 2008). They object even if that means *worse* policy solutions, *weaker* democracy and *less* protection domestically through higher prices for imported goods, abstaining from multilateral negotiations, and the absence of an external enforcer of rights such as the ECtHR (Moravcsik, 2000, p. 313). We shall henceforth focus on principled Sovereignism.

Dimensions

As with Euroscepticism, nationalism, populism (Bornschiefer, 2010; Grande & Hutter, 2016; Hobolt, 2016; Hooghe & Marks, 2018; Kriesi et al., 2012; Mudde, 2007) or social science concepts more generally (e.g. Goertz, 2006), Sovereignism possesses several dimensions. The preceding discussion has emphasized three aspects in particular: culture, economy and politics. Although primarily concerned with sovereignty as a legal and political construct, the ideology has both cultural and economic implications when it comes to who should constitute the demos and where potential danger could come from, namely through immigration or lack of economic means of subsistence. We discuss these two first before returning to the political dimension.

Culturally, Sovereignism aims for the protection of a nation’s collective identity and peaceful existence against foreign intrusion, rivalry, dilution and crime. The particular traits of the collective identity supposedly under threat can be ethnic (e.g. the national language or religion) or civic (e.g. pride in productivity, institutions or law-abiding modesty). The enemies of cultural Sovereignism, so to speak, are thus less the supranational organizations and regimes, as such, but rather the individuals or groups whom

these organizations and regimes permit to enter, stay, work and live in the country. Hence the opposition to the EU's free movement of persons and demands for the re-introduction of border controls. Sovereignism's strategic alliance with exclusive nationalism is most obvious in this dimension (Alles & Badie, 2016, p. 18). A famous image summarizing this aspect is that of the 'Polish Plumber' in France and the UK, who symbolised the openness of the (now intra-EU) border to East-European citizens. The Polish Plumber is, of course, not only Polish but also a plumber, which brings us to consider the second dimension of Sovereignism.

Economically, sovereigntists strive to shield the domestic economy from the adverse effects of globalization, market integration and other countries' competitive advantages (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). Domestic companies and employees and the wealth and products generated by them are intrinsic goods, on the one hand, but also instrumental in that they enable the country to remain independent from the outside world. While the goal of autarky ties it to the agricultural sector and its deep-seated image as both essential food-producers and homeland, protectionism can serve other industries, too, for example the energy and communication sectors. Supranational institutions are again identified as the main culprit. To wit, again, Donald Trump (2018): 'countries were admitted to the World Trade Organization that violate every single principle on which the organization is based. [...] The United States lost over 3 million manufacturing jobs, nearly a quarter of all steel jobs, and 60,000 factories after China joined the WTO. [...] We will not allow our workers to be victimized, our companies to be cheated, and our wealth to be plundered and transferred. America will never apologize for protecting its citizens'.

The cultural and economic dimensions connect Sovereignism to factors that are usually found to influence an individual's propensity to be Eurosceptic (Safi, 2010, p. 107). By contrast, those who either expect or have already experienced personal or collective gains from EU integration are in favour of it: highly skilled, well-educated and cosmopolitan persons with a universalist or European identity (e.g. Safi, 2010, p. 113; also Hobolt, 2016 and Kriesi et al., 2008). Thus, if defensive-exclusive (but not aggressive-expansive) nationalism marks cultural Sovereignism, protectionism and selective state interventionism occupy the economic side. But there is more to the story than simply regarding the supranational as either a threat or opportunity in cultural and/or economic terms. Goods and people are important, but rules matter, too. To a large extent, such concerns for the *political* dimension of sovereignty are driven by real-world developments themselves. These are aptly summarized by Hooghe & Marks (2018, p. 114):

National sovereignty and its political expression, the national veto, are obstacles to problem-solving, which is why many international organizations pool authority among their member states in quasi-majoritarian decision-making.

Right-wing populist parties almost always use this political dimension most prominently in their manifestos and electoral campaigns. They share a deep-seated and principled resistance to international legal regimes of all kind, from the UN through the EU 'super-state', to the ECtHR (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017) and the International Criminal Court (Pollock, 2017; Resnik, 2008). Moreover, the Swiss People's Party (SVP), for example, defends the right of the Swiss citizenry to decide policy questions directly, regularly, bindingly and – most importantly – in an unrestricted manner (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013, pp. 362–363). While such direct-democratic absolutism is unique in comparison to the US, British or

Hungarian Sovereignism, the logic of argumentation is not: democratic nation-states are built on popular sovereignty, so the people should remain sovereign in line with *their own* democratic procedures. The rallying cry of Brexiteers, to 'take back control', accordingly refers to parliamentary sovereignty (de Londres, 2017), US sovereigntists emphasize 'foundational American commitments to democratic majoritarianism and [...] federalism' (Resnik, 2008, p. 34), and in Switzerland it is direct democracy.

Why Switzerland? Case and data

The following analyses focus on the case of Switzerland, for two main reasons. First, there is a striking resemblance between sovereigntist discourse and voting behaviour in Switzerland and recent events in the US, the UK and elsewhere (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017). The actors themselves are fully aware of this. For example, when Steve Bannon visited Switzerland in spring 2018, he called the SVP's *de facto* leader, Christoph Blocher, 'Trump before Trump' (Swissinfo, 2018). Similar praise was heaped onto the Swiss way of dealing with the EU by Nigel Farage, then UKIP leader and main advocate of Brexit, on his visit four years prior: 'you lucky people!' (Schoop, 2014). So as other sovereigntists look to be inspired by Swiss developments, it is important to study that context more closely.

That inspiration is both substantive and procedural. Regarding the former, the main aspect to be pointed out is that Switzerland is not a member of the EU, yet has fairly broad access to its single market. Procedurally, what is praised is the fact that citizens get to vote on important policy questions directly, via referendums, and can even set their own (constitutional) agenda in a binding way, via popular initiatives. The main actor to have opposed both further supranational integration and immigration is the SVP, whose ascendancy began precisely with – and due to – its opposition to the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992 (Kriesi et al., 2005). Direct-democratic instruments have played a key role for the SVP's mobilization, radicalization and issue-ownership strategies (Kriesi et al., 2005).

The second reason why we study Switzerland is that, precisely because of direct democracy, it offers an almost unique opportunity to study the evolution and dimensions of Sovereignism. Every year, several collectively binding, nation-wide referendums are held. Some of them explicitly focus on Sovereignism, such as the aforementioned 'self-determination initiative' rejected in 2018, accession to the EEA, UN membership or immigration caps. Projects concerning Sovereignism differ in the dimensions – political, cultural or economic – that are affected. Since June 1981, referendums have been followed by an official post-vote survey (VOX); amongst others, respondents were asked their opinion on at least four issue-related arguments. Some of these arguments can be assigned to the three dimensions. VOX also includes information on individual vote choice, as well as socio-demographic and socio-psychological factors. This allows us to verify whether and to what extent the various dimensions of Sovereignism have evolved and if and how they have influenced vote choice.

Methodologically, we proceeded in three steps. We first surveyed all the opinions/arguments ever asked by VOX pollsters on all the 259 referendums assessed between June 1981 and June 2016.³ For every vote, VOX includes between 4 and 19 questions asking for (dis)agreement (expressed from –2 through 0 to +2) with the most important opinions voiced in the campaign leading up to the vote. These arguments had been carefully

selected by political scientists in the run-up to the survey. From all the arguments ever posed, we selected those relating to Sovereignism, meaning they had to explicitly relate Switzerland to the outside and allude to a potential threat or opportunity. This left us with 136 arguments on 68 different referendums held between 1983 and 2016, that is to say, on average, some two arguments per referendum on Sovereignism (see Appendix A.1).

Second, we categorized all these sovereigntist arguments as being either political, cultural or economic (see again Appendix A.1). *Political* arguments concern the question of where ultimate decision-making power should lie. For instance, the argument that EEA accession is a stepping-stone towards EU membership offers a political perspective since it has to do with eventually sharing decision-making supranationally. *Cultural* arguments concentrate on differences between Swiss citizens and immigrants or asylum seekers, hence the argument that immigration as such leads to higher criminality is a cultural argument. Finally, *economic* arguments contain assessments about the cost and benefit of international treaties for the Swiss economy – for instance, that the Bilateral Treaties signal the end for Swiss agriculture. Selection and categorization were done by the two authors separately, and disagreements were then resolved consensually. We thus ended up with 60 political, 44 cultural, and 37 economic arguments, bringing the total to 141 (in five cases, an argument was placed into two categories at the same time). Where needed, we recoded the arguments so that higher values indicate greater support for Sovereignism. Using these arguments, we then created three variables, one each for the political, cultural and economic dimensions.

Results

This section assesses whether agreement with arguments associated with cultural, economic and political Sovereignism influenced individual vote choice in Switzerland between 1983 and 2016. If so, can we identify a hierarchy between these three? Are there changes over time? We subsequently run multilevel logistic regressions, since voters and their choices are nested within the different referendums and their attributes.

The *dependent variable* is the self-declared vote choice of respondents. Since we would like this to capture Sovereignism, we recoded vote choice for all proposals that suggested a culturally more cosmopolitan, internationally and economically open, or supranationally integrated course of action (e.g. accession to the UN), so that voting ‘yes’ now means being in favour of Sovereignism (i.e. voting against UN accession).

As *independent variables*, we use respondents’ agreement with the aforementioned pro and contra arguments, which we have ourselves classified as political, cultural, or economic (see also Appendix A.1). We also include the year of each vote in our analysis, to check if and how the impact of the three dimensions has changed over time.

In addition, we include several controls that have been shown to impact individual vote choice. Regarding gender and age, we assume higher support for Sovereignism by men and older people (Hobolt, 2016), whereas when it comes to education, we expect citizens with a lower level of education to prefer more Sovereignism (Sciarini and Tresch, 2009). Territorially, we include respondents’ linguistic region, relying on the observation that German-speaking and Italian-speaking Swiss⁴ are more sovereigntist than French-speaking Swiss (cf. e.g. Kriesi et al., 1996), and we distinguish between rural and urban areas,

assuming rural citizens to prefer more Sovereignism (Scholten, 2014). We also model party preferences, because parties are highly important in the Swiss semi-direct democracy for organizing and mobilizing voters (e.g. Ladner, 2014; Mueller & Bernauer, 2018), and because they exhibit different positions regarding Sovereignism (Trechsel, 2007; Linder & Mueller, 2017). More specifically, we expect SVP supporters to favour Sovereignism more strongly than all others. We also include trust in government, since populist attitudes were argued above to partially overlap with Sovereignism (McLaren, 2007).⁵

We also make use of attitude variables,⁶ which we use to measure *values*. Most importantly, we incorporate an index constructed using self-ascribed positions on three items concerning the integration–demarcation conflict, which is said to be highly important for votes on EU integration and immigration (Kriesi, 1998; Kriesi et al., 2012). We equally include a variable concerning the state-market conflict, which could prove important for the economic side of voting. Finally, we model a variable concerning preferences for federal vs. unitary state solutions, since some aspects of the political dimension of Sovereignism – namely the degree of inter-territorial solidarity, the importance of borders and shared rule areas – resemble centralization at supranational level. However, we do not include the traditional variable on left-right self-positioning, since perceptions by respondents have changed over time.

To control for *vote-specific impacts*, we include a variable on the share of the four major (governing) parties supporting the sovereigntist position. This allows us to see whether Sovereignism is less (or more) pronounced when there is consensus across the political spectrum, assuming that greater endorsement of the sovereigntist position by the elite enhances the probability for a favourable vote. We control for the strength of populist attitudes in a year by aggregating all responses on the integration–demarcation index over a calendar year.⁷ Additionally, we take into consideration that quite a few popular initiatives on Sovereignism were formulated and supported solely by the SVP. We control for these special cases using a dummy variable for popular votes in which the SVP alone favoured the sovereigntist position. The position of the Federal Council (the Swiss executive) is also included since for many citizens it functions as an important and trusted cue-giver. Finally, we control for the type of the vote, that is to say, whether it is a popular initiative demanding constitutional change, a facultative referendum against a specific Act of Parliament, or a mandatory referendum in case of constitutional amendments decided by Parliament. While the initiative and mandatory referendum both relate to the federal constitution, both the initiative and facultative referendum are launched from outside Parliament. The type of the vote matters because of the different success rates associated with them (Kriesi, 2005; Linder & Mueller, 2017).

Additionally, we need to make sure that we are actually measuring the impact of the arguments themselves and not the impact of the mere *supply* of these arguments. Otherwise it could be the case that any effects we are able to detect derived from the fact, that in some years, sovereigntist votes mainly concerned cultural aspects, while in other years, it was votes on the political side of Sovereignism that dominated. Indeed, [Figure 1](#) shows that the number of arguments across the three dimensions varies strongly over time, but that the three dimensions largely meander together. We thus also take differences in the supply of arguments into account, on the assumption that the number of arguments captures the saliency of any given dimension.

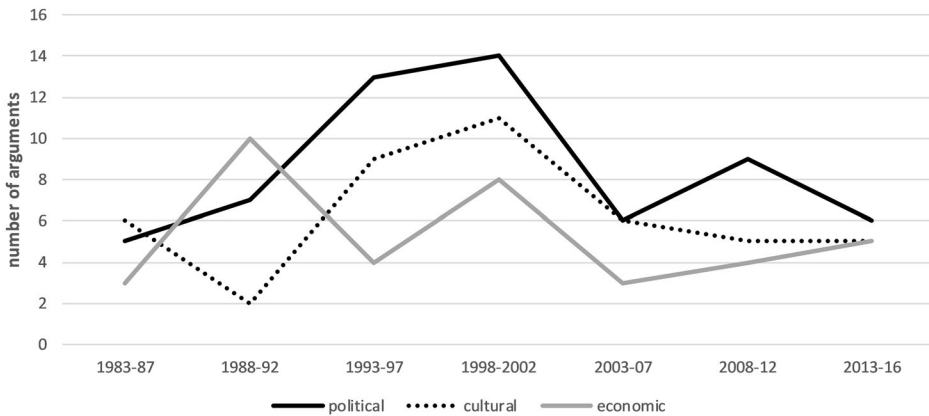


Figure 1. Number and type of sovereigntist arguments per referendum, 1983–2016.

The argument variables can only be included in the analysis sequentially, since there are missing values for all proposals where such questions were not asked. Their impact is thus conditional on proposals where an effect has already been expected by the designers of the questionnaire. We need to keep this in mind when interpreting our findings.

Table 2 shows the results of our multilevel logistic regression models, with the projects as grouping variable at level 2. We see that all of the arguments significantly and positively influence individual vote choice. Models 2–4 show how agreeing with any of the three types of arguments predicts Sovereignism. Cultural arguments have a slightly stronger effect than the other two, but the size of the impact of the three dimensions on the vote choice regarding sovereigntist questions is more or less identical. Thus speaking *only* of culture or only of culture *and* economics when talking about Sovereignism would mean to neglect a substantial part of the phenomenon. In turn, the supply of political, cultural or economic arguments in the last five years before a given popular vote does not significantly affect individual vote choice.⁸

Model 5 includes all three dimensions simultaneously and thus only considers six popular votes.⁹ This allows us to compare the respective impact of the three dimensions, albeit only in a handful of (important) projects. We can thus see that in these specific cases – which either had to do with the EU or concerned successful SVP initiatives – economic arguments had a stronger effect on vote choice than cultural or political arguments, although the latter two also prove significant. Once more, then, all three dimensions matter.

Table 2 also shows several other significant determinants of sovereigntist voting. Traditional determinants like gender, education, language, party preference and trust in the national government all matter in the expected directions. At the level of votes, neither the size of the pro-camp, nor the distinction of projects into those only supported by the SVP vs. all others significantly affects vote choice. The probability of a sovereigntist vote is only greater when a larger coalition supports the proposal and the economic dimension is concerned.

If we next include our value variables (see Table A.2 in the Appendix), which we could not for our main models as they were only assessed after 1994, we see a significant and positive effect for demarcation preferences, as well as partly for federalism. In these

Table 2. Multilevel logistic regressions on vote choice concerning sovereigntist proposals.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Political arguments		0.72*** (0.01)			0.48*** (0.04)
Supply of political arguments		0.09 (0.05)			
Cultural arguments			0.80*** (0.02)		0.59*** (0.04)
Supply of cultural arguments			-0.02 (0.08)		
Economic arguments				0.74*** (0.02)	0.79*** (0.05)
Supply of economic arguments				0.17 (0.10)	
Age	0.07 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.06)	0.16* (0.07)	-0.07 (0.07)	-0.28 (0.17)
Sex (0=male, 1=female)	-0.16*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.04)	-0.19*** (0.04)	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.11 (0.11)
Language: French (base group: German)	-0.13*** (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.05)	-0.22*** (0.05)	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.22 (0.13)
Language: Italian (base group: German)	0.22*** (0.05)	0.37*** (0.07)	0.27*** (0.08)	0.22* (0.09)	1.11*** (0.20)
urban – rural (base group: urban)	-0.05* (0.03)	-0.10* (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)	-0.15 (0.12)
Level of education	-0.13*** (0.01)	-0.15*** (0.01)	-0.13*** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.23*** (0.04)
Trust in government	-0.66*** (0.03)	-0.95*** (0.04)	-0.82*** (0.04)	-0.44*** (0.05)	-1.22*** (0.11)
Party: SP (base group: SVP)	-2.01*** (0.05)	-2.06*** (0.08)	-2.22*** (0.09)	-1.65*** (0.09)	-2.68*** (0.24)
Party: FDP (base group: SVP)	-1.19*** (0.05)	-1.30*** (0.08)	-1.41*** (0.09)	-0.74*** (0.09)	-1.77*** (0.23)
Party: CVP (base group: SVP)	-1.26*** (0.06)	-1.46*** (0.09)	-1.59*** (0.10)	-0.77*** (0.10)	-1.72*** (0.26)
Party: Green (base group: SVP)	-1.96*** (0.09)	-1.97*** (0.13)	-2.29*** (0.15)	-1.40*** (0.15)	-2.10*** (0.38)
Party: other party (base group: SVP)	-1.17*** (0.05)	-1.30*** (0.07)	-1.32*** (0.08)	-0.87*** (0.08)	-1.78*** (0.22)
Party: no party preference (base group: SVP)	-1.16*** (0.04)	-1.25*** (0.07)	-1.27*** (0.08)	-0.97*** (0.08)	-1.77*** (0.22)
size of pro-camp	0.58 (0.46)	-0.25 (0.58)	2.14 (3.42)	2.89* (1.21)	2.92 (3.05)
coalition: SVP vs. others (base group: other coalition)	0.18 (0.19)	0.44 (0.24)	-0.18 (0.80)	0.30 (0.40)	--
government recommendation	0.87** (0.33)	1.59** (0.52)	0.21 (2.47)	-0.74 (0.89)	--
facultative referendum (base group: initiative)	0.07 (0.16)	0.06 (0.26)	0.10 (0.31)	0.08 (0.34)	-1.31** (0.54)
mandatory referendum (base group: initiative)	-0.14 (0.23)	0.05 (0.35)	0.21 (0.43)	-0.17 (0.81)	-1.63 (1.71)
counterproposal (base group: initiative)	-0.59 (0.62)	--	--	0.42 (0.84)	--
year	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.06 (0.08)
Constant	0.23 (0.26)	-0.22 (0.50)	0.28 (0.74)	-1.27 (0.98)	2.30 (1.94)
N (respondents)	35,449	19,897	16,460	14,020	3883
N (projects)	70	37	30	27	6
AIC	40,444	18,427	14,445	13,146	2284
BIC	40,639	18,617	14,630	13,335	2428

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, --: variable dropped because of missing variance.

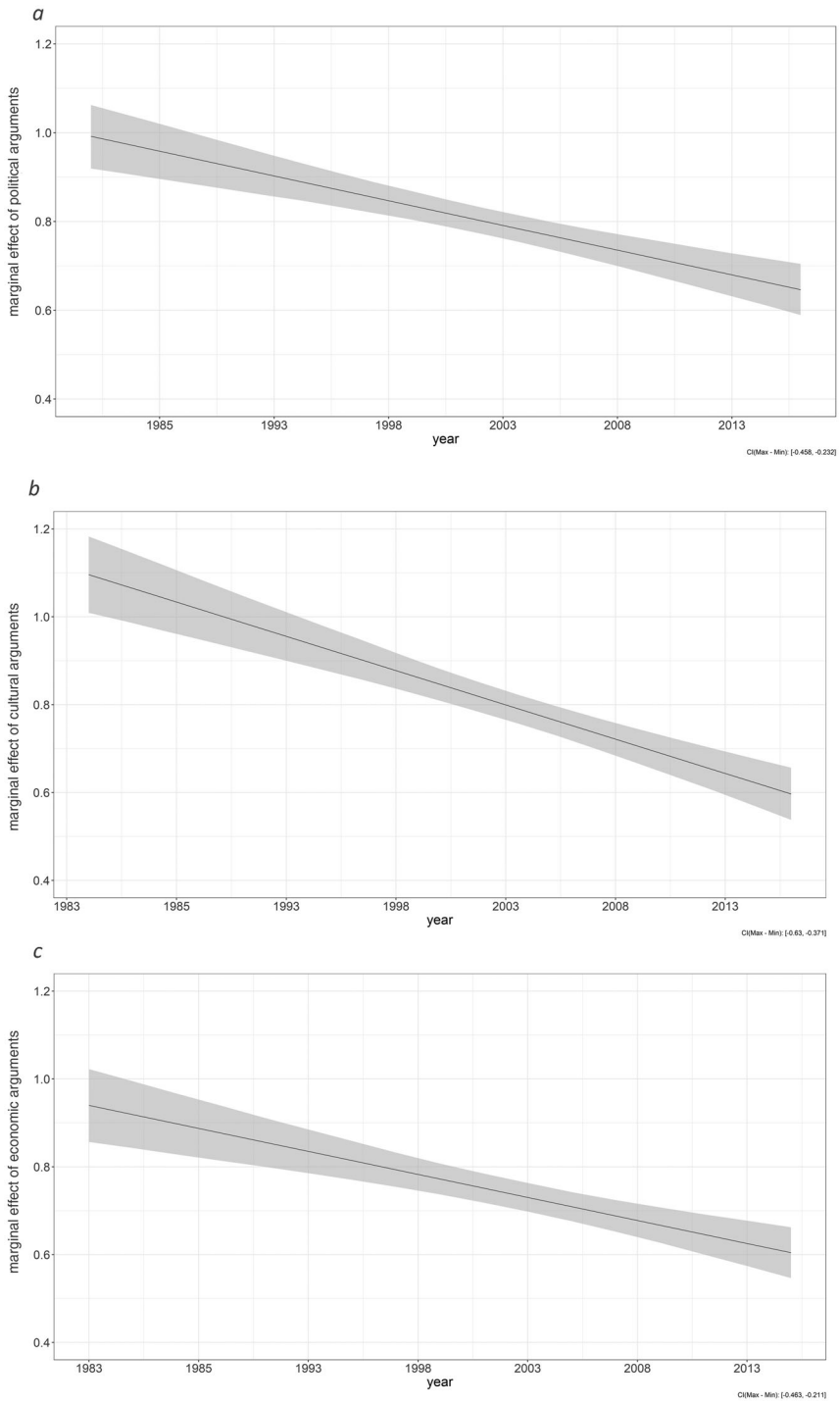


Figure 2. a–c: Marginal effects of sovereigntist dimensions over time.

Note: Values on the y-axis reflect the size of the effect of political, cultural and economic arguments on vote choice.

same models we also include our populism variable, which, however, only significantly impacts vote choice for proposals possessing either a cultural or economic dimension. All three dimensions of Sovereignism retain their positive and significant effects on vote choice of roughly equal magnitude when controlling for those values.

However, we detect no temporal effect on vote choice, neither without (Table 2) nor with the value variables included (Table A.2). Sovereignist decisions have thus not become more or less probable over the course of these 30 years. However, since public discourses on nation-state sovereignty and immigration (Hooghe & Marks, 2018) have indeed changed over time, along with party activism and mobilization strategies (Hoeglinger, 2016), we might expect a dynamic impact from the different arguments on vote choice. We thus model moderating effects between time and type of

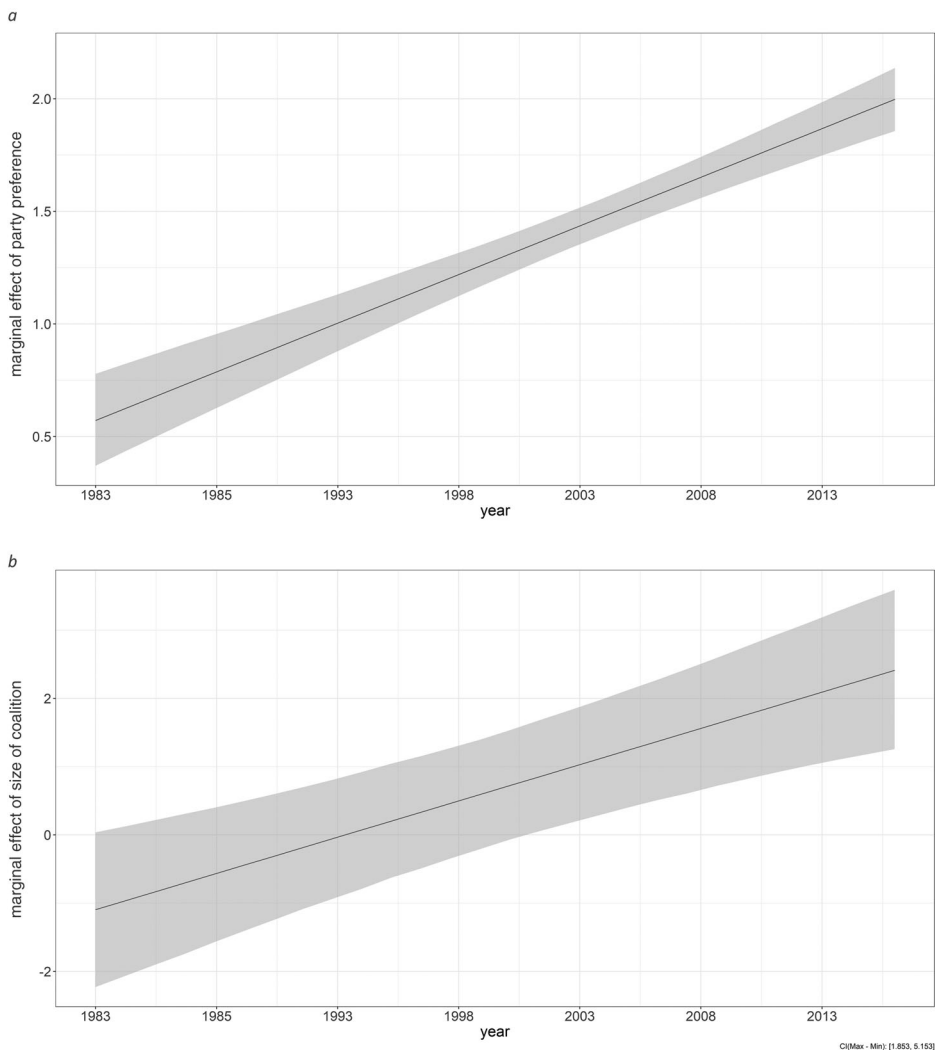


Figure 3. a–f: Marginal effects of additional variables on vote choice over time.

Note: Values on the y-axis reflect the size of the effect on vote choice.

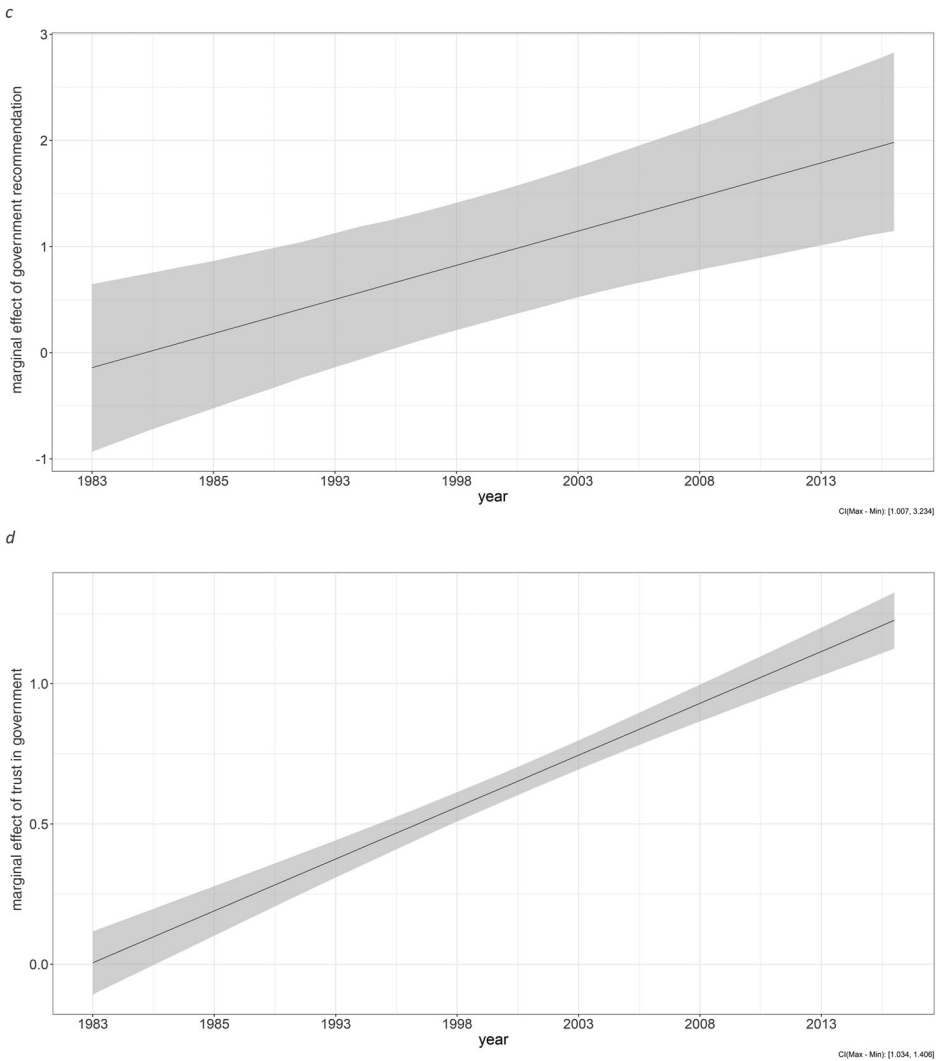


Figure 3. Continued.

arguments. Figure 2(a–c) indeed demonstrates that the impact of all three dimensions on sovereigntist voting has declined over time. In the 1980s, the cultural and political dimensions affected vote choice about equally strongly, but the effect of political arguments decreased slightly more over time and ends up lowest. Economic arguments initially had a somewhat smaller effect than the other two. However, the economic effect did not decrease as steeply and finishes on a par with culture. These findings apply more or less identically to all three linguistic regions of Switzerland (not shown).

Additional analyses show that while the three argumentative dimensions have lost some of their effect on vote choice, cues as well as values have in turn gained in importance. Figure 3(a–f) shows that preferences for the SVP, the size of a coalition in favour of Sovereignism, government recommendations and trust in government as well as integration–demarcation and centralism–federalism have all affected vote

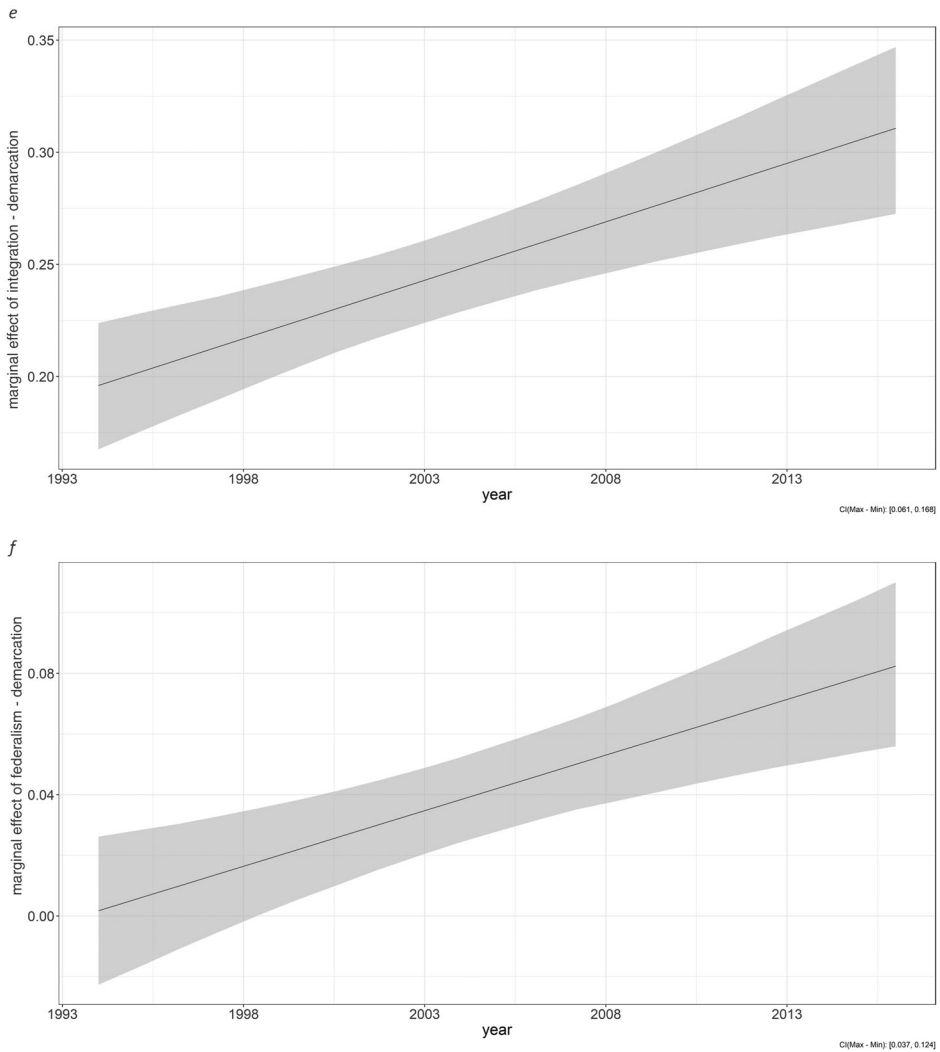


Figure 3. Continued.

choice more strongly over time. This coincides with the often-stated assumption that most Swiss citizens have developed stable predispositions on immigration and EU accession – and thus also on Sovereignism – over time (Milic et al., 2014). That makes them rely less on specific arguments and more on long-term attitudes. What started as a series of vote-specific arguments related to different dimensions of social life has therefore been rebundled into a specific worldview that gives preference to either nation-state sovereignty or international integration in all its facets. We interpret this to mean that not only the arguments, but also the three dimensions have lost some of their impact on Sovereignism over time: the more important stable attitudes and values for individual decision-making, the less relevant the specific issue voted upon.

Conclusion

This article has argued for Sovereignism to be a distinct ideology fighting for or defending nation-state sovereignty. Like so many other social science concepts, sovereignty and Sovereignism possess different dimensions:

1. Where sovereignty relates to cultural identity by delimiting and collectively marking a group of persons (the nation), Sovereignism defends that group from intrusion by non-nationals with different customs, values, or markers.
2. Where sovereignty relates to the economy by defining companies, workers and consumers operating on a fixed territory (the state), Sovereignism strives to assure their prosperity, stability, and success at all costs.
3. Where sovereignty relates to politics by defining those entitled to participate in collectively binding decision-making (the demos), Sovereignism defends that group from outside interference by foreign rules and rule-makers alike.

Using survey data on individual voters on a total of 68 Swiss referendums over more than 30 years has allowed us to measure, verify and analyse the evolution and impact of these three dimensions. Our main finding is that all three types of arguments matter for individual vote choice even after controlling for a range of other factors, including values and attitudes.

Given that the literature has so far largely subsumed politics within *either* the cultural *or* the economic struggle for identity and resources, or argued for politics to be *the result* of their interplay, let us dwell some more on the political dimension. The SVP's 'self-determination initiative' rejected in November 2018 is a paradigmatic expression of that side of Sovereignism. While the Swiss government argued that international treaties are the very result of national sovereignty (BR, 2017, p. 5357), the SVP viewed both the direct-democratic and civic rights of Swiss citizens jeopardized by unaccountable supranationalism and technocratic legalism. Thus although the argument that the non-Swiss ('foreign') judges sitting in Strasbourg are less democratic *because* of their citizenship might be interpreted in a cultural manner, the initiative was eminently political since it argued for the protection of the content and status of the Swiss Constitution (Argumentarium, 2018, p. 4, 8). That strongly resembles Trump's (2018) 'America is governed by Americans' and the Brexit slogan to 'take back control' (cf. also De Spiegeleire et al., 2017).

However, we also detected a declining importance of all three dimensions of Sovereignism – measured through approval with the respective arguments – on vote choice over time. In turn, cues such as political party preference or government recommendations, as well as the more stable values regarding integration–demarcation have become more important for individual decisions. Sovereignism is thus not necessarily a new phenomenon, but what might have changed is its (re-)discovery and manifold use by political actors, notably right-wing populists and nationalists.

Where does all this leave us? Undisputedly, Sovereignism has marked not only direct-democratic, consociational, small and trade-dependent Switzerland, but is also present in representative, majoritarian, large and relatively trade-independent democracies such as the UK and the US. It often serves as one of the argumentative backbones of both nationalism and populism, for example when complaining about international institutions being unaccountable to citizens, distant technocrats hollowing out domestic governance, or

waning border control causing an influx of foreigners, drugs and crime (usually conflated into one). However, after momentous events such as the UK voting to leave the EU and an isolationist being elected US president, in the hope not least to restore full 'parliamentary sovereignty' and renegotiate treaties to better serve 'the national interest', Sovereignism clearly deserves to be studied on its own. Looking not just at a few, but at 68 referendums over more than 30 years has allowed us to do exactly that.

The main takeaway message of broader interest from this article is the following. Individual attributes and values such as gender, education and international openness matter for whether the supranational, post-Westphalian world is regarded as a dangerous threat or an enriching opportunity. At the same time, the demarcation–integration conflict and party preferences also play a role. However, it might be precisely Sovereignism's political grain of truth, namely that most supranational institutions *are* less democratic in character than nation-states (Goodhart & Bondanella Tanichev, 2011, p. 1053; Moravcsik, 2000, p. 312; but see Keohane et al., 2009) that explains why its appeal has gone far beyond the core electorate of nationalists or populists *pur et simple*. Only by also knowing of the political dimension of Sovereignism are we able to fully understand such retreats into the nation-state.

Notes

1. E.g. <https://www.bk.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/va/20181125/index.html> [26.11.2018].
2. We thank one of the journal's reviewers for drawing our attention to this.
3. See <http://fors-nesstar.unil.ch/webview> [01.10.2018]. Path: "VOXIT -> projects -> vote -> variable description -> III. arguments for the decision". In total, 304 referendums were held in that period (BFS 2018). Of the 297 votes surveyed by VOX, no arguments were asked for 38 votes, leaving us with 259.
4. The position of Italian-speaking Swiss compared to the German-speaking and French-speaking Swiss has changed over the years (e.g. Mazzoleni, 2017).
5. Note that the contradiction between shoring up mistrust in the current government as representing a 'corrupt elite' and defending one's state – and by implication, that very same governing elite – is one that is never really resolved by populist sovereignists.
6. Unfortunately, attitude questions were only assessed from 1994 onwards.
7. This is far from a perfect measure for populism, but since arguments on demarcation are an important part of (right-wing) populist rhetoric, it does at least help in identifying phases of strong appeal to populist arguments.
8. Leaving out the supply variables reduces the size of the coefficients of the three dimensions only marginally, and they all remain strongly significant.
9. These are: EEA accession (6.12.1992), Bilateral Agreements with the EU (21.5.2000), extension of free movement of persons (25.9.2005), continuation and extension of free movement of persons to Romania and Bulgaria (8.2.2009), ban on minarets (29.11.2009), and the initiative 'against mass immigration' (9.2.2014).

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