Do Politicians Keep their Promises?

Comparing MPs' pre-election statements in web-based voting assistance tools
with post-election legislative behaviour in Switzerland

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Abstract

The paper examines the half-life of election pledges: Do politicians keep their pre-election promises once elected? In the theoretical part the paper argues that reneging on a promise can have multiple reasons and should not be put on a level with lies and deception; nevertheless it affects an important qualitative aspect of modern representative democracy: accountability. The paper addresses the question in a purely empirical way, comparing the MPs' pre-elections statements in the Swiss voting assistance application "smartvote.ch" with post-election legislative behaviour between 2003 and 2008. The data contain 3751 single comparisons of pre- and post-electoral statements/votes of 253 MPs on 26 issues. The results show that shifts of revealed preferences occur in 15 percent of the cases, while MPs of centrist parties are more frequently affected than those of leftist or rightist parties. Even when a party's core issues are at stake the effect on preference shift levels of centrist parties remains insignificant while rightist and leftist parties exhibit a clear decrease. The importance an MP attaches to the smartvote tool in his or her election campaign as well as the importance an MP attaches to the official positions of his/her own party do not have any significant effect on preference shift levels. Thus, the authors altogether conclude in favour of the operators and users of voting assistance tools that the answers of the MPs are quite reliable, and that possible distortions by official party instructions and the MP's personal attitude towards the tool remain weak.

1. Introduction

This paper is neither about lying politicians nor about dishonest pre-election behaviour of candidates. There are many good reasons why members of parliament (MPs) change their mind once elected. Rather, this article deals with the closeness of the bonds between the electorate and their MPs and thus affects an important qualitative dimension of parliamentary democracy: accountability. The three main research questions of this paper are:

- To what extent do political preferences revealed before an election persist in post-election behaviour?
- How reliable are pre-election statements of MPs for the voters?
- What conclusions can be drawn as to the use and benefit of internet-based tools for voters?

Thanks to the emergence of online voting assistance applications (VAAs) we have for the first time the possibility to compare concrete pre-election pledges with post-election behaviour of MPs. In this paper we use data of the Swiss VAA "www.smartvote.ch" which was used in the general elections of 2003 and 2007 and compare them with the 2003-2008 legislative records.[1]

2. Conceptual considerations

2.1 Clashing concepts

Before evaluating whether MPs keep their promises or not, we should turn to the more theoretical question whether, why, and to what extent MPs are bound to keep them at all. In democratic theory the answer to this question is far from clear since it poses a dilemma between two fundamentals of modern liberal democracies: the free parliamentary mandate of representatives on the one hand, and the legitimate expectation of the people to be politically represented as expressed in the election campaign on the other. More of the former means less of the latter, and *vice versa*.

This dispute dates back to the 18th century when people like Edmund Burke in Britain (e.g. in his famous speech to the electors of Bristol in 1774; see Burke 1792), Marquis de Condorcet in France (cited by van der Hulst 2000), or the Federalists in the U.S. (Madison, Hamilton and Jay 1987) advocated that MPs should be seen as *trustees* (instead of *delegates*). An MP shall not sacrifice "his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience", as Burke (1792: 15) puts it, to the electorate, and further:

"[P]arliament is a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You chuse a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of *parliament*" (Burke, 1792, 15-16; original spelling).

[1] In the 2007 general elections the operators of smartvote also run an English version for Swiss citizens abroad: navigate to http://www.smartvote.ch, select English as language and choose the elections to the National Council (or the Council of States which is the upper chamber) of 21 October 2007.

The modern theoretical equivalent to the old concept of trusteeship can be found in today's *deliberation theories* which see some merits in conditions that favour mutual respect and constructive behaviour in collective discussions or bargaining processes (see e.g. Bächtiger 2005; Dryzek 2002; Elster 1998). Elster (1998), for instance, finds in a study of three constitutional conventions that closed-door discussions abet the sincerity and esteem during discussions. To be sure, this does not mean that we should go back to absolute confidentiality of parliamentary debates; deliberation theory merely suggests to leave room for confidentiality in certain situations, e.g. in legislative committees, which might facilitate resolving difficult bargaining processes and prevent the involved actors from losing their face, their credibility, and finally their mandate.[2]

Delegation theories in general, and *principal-agent approaches* in particular, form the antagonistic approach to the topic. Carey (2007: 93) reminds us that "political parties serve as information conduits to citizens. [...] If the voting behavior of a party's legislators is unrelated to the positions in its national platform, then the party's label has no informational value." Information asymmetries between the principals (the voters) and the agents (the MPs) lead to agency loss, i.e. to a gap between the actual legislative behaviour of MPs and the behaviour if the voters had the unrestricted resources to do the job themselves (Lupia 2003). Agency loss can be reduced by institutional *ex ante* or *ex post* mechanisms, designed to raise transparency in parliamentary decision making and accountability of legislators. Two such mechanisms are the political screening before the election (like VAAs do) or the constant monitoring of voting behaviour after the election (the field of legislative monitoring applications, LMAs). However, the supply of additional information does not always improve the situation, or may even aggravate it, if you see the present state as one of "informational overload" (Strøm *et al*. 2003: 741):

"[G]iven the overwhelming amount of available information it is difficult to filter out 'noise' and get to the core of what is relevant. Informational overload means that even better-educated citizens are often unwilling to search for information and consider it the politicians' obligation to deliver by the door. Perhaps the information-education revolution in the end has done more to raise expectations than to satisfy demands for transparency. To put it in the words of media studies, voters seem more 'over-newsed but under-informed' than ever before."

2.2 The crucial role of ICT

The increasing popularity of information and communication technology (ICT), and therein mainly of internet-based VAAs and LMAs, is re-stimulating the debate between the advocators of the free parliamentary mandate and maximum deliberative freedom on the one hand, and the protagonists of full

[2] See also Jeremy Bentham's "Essay on Political Tactics" (Bentham 1962; first published 1816) in which he proposes to hold a secret vote when public pressure holds the risk that the free will of the deputies could be distorted.

transparency and accountability to the electorate on the other (Schwarz/Fivaz 2007). In this context ICT applications play a double role: Firstly, they provide the research community with the necessary data about the MPs' political preferences before and after elections. Secondly, ICT applications themselves may influence the political behaviour of MPs and thus change the research object (Ladner *et al.* 2008a; for examples of how the visibility of legislative voting affects the political behaviour, see Carey 2004, 2009). Most likely, this strengthens the representational link between voters and MPs (accountability and responsiveness) while it remains unexplored in what way it might affect the quality of legislative deliberation.

Moreover, the question arises how much importance the candidates attach to the use of VAAs: The more seriously they take them, the less inconsiderate their answers might be (which does not preclude strategic behaviour, of course). Regarding the effect of VAAs on the eventual voting decision, Walgrave *et al.* (2008) draw quite a negative picture for the case of the Belgian elections in 2004, thinking of VAAs as nice toys which do not much influence real voting behaviour. However, Ladner *et al.* (2008a), who use data from a large survey on the use of the Swiss VAA smartvote among voters and candidates in 2007, conclude that the tool plays at least some role in Switzerland's specific context (see below, section 2.4). The candidates do not see smartvote as a mere toy, and they seem to think twice before answering the questionnaire.

In the upcoming sections we use on the one hand the data of the previously mentioned VAA smartvote which was launched in the run-up to the 2003 Swiss general elections and offered for a second time in 2007. The tool included a questionnaire of 70 (2003) and 73 questions (2007) about diverse political issues which allow for a reasonably precise analysis of policy-related and broader ideological positions of the candidates and parties (Ladner *et al.* 2008b). In 2003, smartvote covered 69.5 percent of all elected MPs in the 200-seat National Council, the Swiss lower house; in the 2007 elections this share mounted to 93.5 percent. On the other hand, we take the legislative records of the National Council of the years 2003-2008 and compare them with the smartvote answers of the MPs. By selecting a sample of political issues which came up both in one of the two smartvote questionnaires and in subsequent parliamentary debates, the paper compares the MPs' answers in the questionnaire with actual legislative voting behaviour (see figure 1, for details see section 4.1).

[Figure 1]

2.3 Theoretical constellations

As already mentioned in the first section, there are many good reasons to change one's mind: some are associated with social pressure within the party group or enforced party discipline, others with the ongoing process of opinion shaping in non-predisposed policy fields. Sometimes, MPs do not have clear preferences because they are not interested in the topic and therefore simply side with the majority of their party group. Sometimes, new facts may appear or external circumstances may change, and with them the opinion of the

MPs. By the same token, preference instability[3] may be a result of bargaining processes or of the persuasive power of deliberative processes. Some parties – typically those in the political centre of the party spectrum, i.e. CVP and FDP in the case of Switzerland – engage more often in "bridge-building" proposals which include political compromises and thus sometimes a change of mind. The exact reasons why candidates change their position once elected are unknown to us and the data we analyse does not provide us with the means to disentangle all possible reasons for preference instability.

We should also bear in mind that both preference stability *and* instability can occur *because* or *despite* party pressure, following a famous argument by Krehbiel (1993) for the case of party influence on individual voting behaviour. In figure 2 we therefore designed a tree diagram of answer patterns between the individual MP, the nationwide majority position of his/her party colleagues, and the majority position of his/her parliamentary party group. The diagram begins with the observed answer pattern at individual MP level between the statement in the smartvote questionnaire and actual voting behaviour in parliament which can be congruent (A-A) or incongruent (A-B). It continues with the nationwide pre-election majority position of all candidates of the own party on the same smartvote question which in both cases again can be A or B. Next, we look at the post-election majority position of all MPs of the own parliamentary party group which once more consists of A or B. This leads to eight basic constellations (I - VIII), depending on the congruence pattern of the expressed issue preference at individual and party level(s).

The diagram serves as a first analytical basis and gives an overview of the behavioural structure to the research questions.

[Figure 2]

2.4 Some characteristics of Switzerland's institutional setting

The 2003 and 2007 lower-house elections in Switzerland took place in 20 multi-member (MMD) and 6 single-member districts (SMD). The voting system is proportional representation (PR) with open party lists, and in SMD first-past-the-post. The open-list system allows for panachage between party lists and cumulation of individual candidates within the same list. The allocation of seats to the candidates is a two-step process: First, it is calculated how many seats each party list wins according to the total amount of "list votes" (i.e., summed-up votes of all candidates on the same list). Second, the decision what candidates get the seats won by the party list in step one is made according to the number of votes the candidates on the specific list received. Thus, within the PR framework the Swiss voting system can be characterised as a candidate-centred one which sets strong incentives for candidates to cultivate a personal profile off the official party positions (Carey/Shugart 1995).

By the same token, there are relatively weak incentives for party unity in the Swiss parliament because of the

[3] When speaking of "preference instability" or "preference shifts/incongruence" we are always referring to *revealed* preferences, i.e. the political positions visible to the public. This does not preclude that revealed preferences do not match true or sincere preferences of an MP.

separation-of-powers framework of the institutional arrangement (Schwarz *et al.* 2009). There is no governmental right to dissolve the parliament and despite the fact that the members of government are elected by parliament, they serve a fixed 4-year term without the possibility of being forced to resign if they loose legislative majority. The Swiss system therefore works similar to the U.S. separation-of-powers framework and produces lower party unity scores of what is usual in parliamentary systems. This means that there is – at least from an institutional point of view – leeway enough for Swiss MPs to implement their political profile as expressed during the election campaign (Schwarz 2009).

3. Theoretical expectations

Despite the explorative character of this paper, we deduce some hypotheses about the expected MP behaviour from previous studies which will be tested in section 4. The hypotheses are related to three dimensions: party unity, political issues, and the use of the smartvote VAA by MPs.

3.1 Party unity

Due to the specific features of the Swiss legislative system (see section 2.4), party unity in Switzerland is lower than in parliamentary systems (Hertig 1978; Lanfranchi/Lüthi 1999). Moreover, there is significant variety in the unity level among Swiss parties which is partly rooted in organisational and cultural differences, e.g. leftist parties usually have a more centralised internal structure and are ideologically more homogeneous than liberal/bourgeois parties (Vasella 1956; Hertig 1978). The overall ranking of the five largest parties shows a constant pattern: highest unity levels are found with the Social-democrats (SP) and the Greens (GP), a middle position is taken by the national-conservative Swiss People's Party (SVP), and lowest are the liberal Free Democrats (FDP) and the Christian-democratic Party (CVP) (see table 1; the same is by the way true for the answers to the smartvote questionnaire, see Ladner *et al.* 2008b).

[Table 1]

For the effect of party unity on preference stability, two competing hypotheses can be formulated:
First, *the higher a party's unity score in parliament the higher the preference stability level*. This can be justified by two arguments: either you assume that a high unity level is a signal for ideological consistency among party members, or you imply that higher unity scores mean heavier pressure on MPs not only in parliament but also before the election to follow party directives or expected party positions when filling in the smartvote questionnaire. More precisely, according to this hypothesis we assume the most frequent congruence of pre- and post-electoral policy positions among members of the SP and the GP, followed by the SVP and finally by FDP/CVP members.

Second, *there is no visible effect of party unity on the level of preference stability* due to the expectation that cohesive parties are always cohesive, both before and after the election, and in non-cohesive parties the MPs enjoy the same positional discretion, both in pre- and post-election times. Thus, we would expect high individual policy congruence of about the same level in all parties.

3.2 Core issues

By comparing the mean standard deviation of the answers of the MPs in the 2007 smartvote questionnaire, Ladner *et al.* (2008b) have identified the core issues for each party on eight issue dimensions (see table 2). We hypothesise that *we find lower levels of preference shifts within the core issues of a party than in other policy areas*. The reason is that the specific policy positions of a party in its core areas usually form the basis for membership; party members in general, and elected candidates in particular, are predisposed in these questions.

[Table 2]

3.3 Use of VAAs

In the wake of the 2007 elections the MPs were requested to take part in a survey on their perception and use of smartvote (Ladner *et al.* 2008a; see also section 2.2). Two questions seem of relevance here: first, how much importance the MPs attach to the tool and second, what points of reference they use when answering the questionnaire (possible options are: party/party platform, cue-taking from party colleagues, positions of other parties, own positions). One can hypothesise that *the more importance they attach to the tool and the more rigidly they adhere to the official positions of their own party when answering the smartvote questionnaire, the less frequent preference shifts will be between the pre- and post-election sphere*.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 The data

The empirical analysis is based on the comparison of 26 smartvote statements with 26 legislative votes on the same issue which are listed in table 3 (together with additional information about the date and the affected policy field). The dataset comprises 253 members of the Swiss National Council (lower house) for which at least one comparison of a smartvote statement with a legislative vote was possible; the total number of comparisons per MP varies between 1 and 26 and the total number of cases in the analysis is 3751, which means that the average number of comparisons per MP is 14.8. In our analysis we use unweighted data, i.e.

we do not correct for differing participation rates of the MPs both in smartvote and parliamentary debates.[4]
Induced by the analytical frameworks, the examination of the tree diagram (section 4.2.1) and the hypothesis testing (4.2.2) use slightly different versions of the dependent variable "preference incongruence": In the tree diagram the measuring of (in)congruence is binary, i.e. the answers to the smartvote questionnaires, which use a four-point scale (fully agree, weakly agree, weakly disagree and fully disagree), and the legislative voting behaviour, where three options are available (yes, no, abstention), are converted to a binary scale according to table 4.
When testing the hypotheses in section 4.2.2 we use a metric version of the dependent variable which includes some information on the intensity of (in)congruence. The value range again is from 0 to 1, but with intermediate steps of 0.25, 0.5, and 0.75, according to the lower part of table 4. For each MP the values are summed up and then divided by the MP's number of comparisons included in the dataset, resulting in an average incongruence level over the maximum number of 26 comparisons.

[Table 3]

[Table 4]

4.2 Findings

4.2.1 Tree diagram patterns

We begin with the analysis of the relative shares of the eight decision patterns (section 2.3) and then move on to test the hypotheses of sections 3.1 to 3.3.
The diagram in figure 3 contains the percentages for each party over the entire tree (see also table 5 which contains more detailed information). Two reading examples: in 84.3 percent of the total cases MPs show stable preferences (A-A) while in 15.7 percent of the cases they give different answers to the smartvote questionnaire and in legislative votes. If we are interested in the congruence of statements between MPs of the Christian-democrats (CVP) and the CVP party group, we sum up the percentages of constellations I and III which are 48.4 + 9.5 = 57.9 percent. Thus, some 58 percent of the CVP MPs show full congruence at individual and party group level (but not necessarily at national party level where 18.2 percent of the cases exhibit disagreement with the majority of smartvote answers). The following paragraphs turn to the main results derived from figure 3.

[Figure 3]

[4] A comparison between candidates with low and high participation rates in regard to their mean preference change showed no substantial differences.

[Table 5]

First, the majority of the cases show stable preferences between smartvote answers and legislative voting behaviour (A-A). The total share of congruent positions amounts to 84.3 percent (as already mentioned in the example above). This certainly is good news for VAA operators and users because it means that the voters using such tools can be confident that pre-election pledges mostly survive the election day (unfortunately, we have no possibility to compare these results with a VAA-free situation because the required data is gathered through the VAA itself). However, there are substantial differences between the five parties: while social-democratic MPs and the Greens show stable preferences in 91.7 and 93.1 percent of the cases, the shares of Christian-democratic and liberal MPs are 15 to 20 percentage points lower. The SVP members take a middle position with a 85.5 percent share of congruent behaviour before and after the elections.

Second, the ranking of the parties according to the preference stability level resembles the general pattern of party unity (see section 3.1). This means that ideologically unified parties also evince higher levels of preference stability (see also the findings in section 4.2.2); this result suggests that candidates of SP, GP, and to a lesser extent also of the SVP, are much more consolidated in their policy positions than the candidates in the political centre of Switzerland's party spectrum (CVP, FDP). On the one hand, this perfectly fits to the notion of CVP and FDP as the majority-building pivots in the Swiss legislature; on the other, it confirms that members of the two centrist parties are easier to convince of other opinions than the members of GP, SP and SVP.

Interestingly, this is only true when looking at the full picture. When we take into account only those cases where the party group majority takes a dissenting position to an MP's answer in the smartvote questionnaire (i.e., constellations II, IV, VI, VIII in figure 3), we see that the share of those MPs changing their mind in favour of the majority position of their party group is more or less the same across the four major parties (around 40 percent for each party; see table 6).[5] This means that there is no indication for unequal exertion of disciplinary measures (or at least unequal effects of the measures applied) on MPs across party groups. This contradicts conventional wisdom among Swiss scholars that the two leftist parties – and also increasingly the SVP – apply heavier peer pressure on dissenting MPs than the two centrist parties.

[Table 6]

4.2.2 Hypothesis testing

In order to test the three hypotheses of chapter 3 we confine ourselves to basic statistics: simple cross-tabulation with chi-square test statistics and scatterplots with embedded bivariate regression line (where statistically adequate). At the current stage of research we are mainly interested in first explorative answers

[5] An exception are the GP members where almost 60 percent show stable preferences; however, this result is based on 49 cases only.

to our research questions and leave more detailed and sophisticated analytical efforts open for the future.

Hypothesis 1a and 1b (party unity)

In hypothesis 1a we postulated a positive correlation between a high party unity score and the party's general preference stability level in parliament. The results which can be seen in table 7 clearly speak in favour of our first assumption. The party groups with the lowest unity scores[6] – that is the FDP and the CVP – exhibit the highest mean preference change (0.257 and 0.296 respectively on a scale from 0 to 1). The SVP, which is commonly considered to take an intermediary position in unity scores, also takes a middle position in regards to preference shifts between the pre- and post-election period. Finally, the two leftist parties which generally have a high level of unity in parliament also seem to be those with the highest consistency between pre- and post-election behaviour of their MPs.

Having tested this first hypothesis we have to conclude that our alternative, contradictory hypothesis 1b postulating no effect of party unity on the level of preference stability, is wrong. We do see a clear difference between the different party groups' levels of preference stability and seem to be able to at least partly attribute this difference to different unity scores.

[Table 7]

Hypothesis 2 (core issues)

In our second hypothesis we assumed that the preference stability of a MP would be higher if the issue at stake fell within the core issues of his or her party group. Even though the ranking of party groups remains the same when considering only the respective core issues of each party group, we do find different levels of preference stability between core issue questions and others when looking at each party separately.

Table 8 lists the mean difference per party group, split up by "core issues" (according to table 2) and "other issues". We see that with the exception of the FDP the preference stability is always higher for core issues than for other issues. As can be seen from the percentage values indicating the difference between the two types of issues this value is quite high for the SP, the GP and the SVP. This indicates that these parties (or rather their MPs) are quite aware of their ideological common ground. It may also indicate that these parties are able to communicate the core issues quite well to their candidates before elections; this interpretation will be further scrutinised in the next section, when looking at the role of the official party position.

In the case of the CVP the difference between core issues and non-core issues is insignificant and the FDP, as already mentioned, even has a negative value. Interestingly, this result corresponds with previous analysis of defecting voting behaviour of individual MPs in the Swiss parliament by Schwarz (2009) who finds that

[6] For establishing the unity scores we use the results of previous studies which constantly attest high party unity to the SP and GP, medium levels to the SVP, and low levels to FDP and CVP (see section 3.1).

legislative votes to a party's core issue reduce defecting behaviour only in the SP and SVP, but have no effect for CVP and FDP (the Greens are not part of the analysis). It seems that the two centrist parties have some problems internally defining their common ground.

[Table 8]

Hypothesis 3 (use of VAAs)

The last hypothesis concerns the use of VAAs. We hypothesised that the mean preference shift of an MP would decrease with (1) increasing importance attached to smartvote and (2) increasing influence of party positions on their smartvote answers. In order to test this assumption we conducted cross-tabulations as well as bivariate linear regressions. For cross-tabulation we split each variable into the three categories "low", "middle" and "high"; for the preference change level (dependent variable) "low" means values from 0 through 0.15, "middle" from 0.15 through 0.3, and "high" everything above 0.3. The answers to the two independent variables, which are originally measured by an 11-point scale of 0 to 10, are categorised as follows: "low" = 0-3, "middle" = 4-6, "high" = 7-10.

Regarding *the importance of the VAA* we do not see a clear-cut correlation with the level of preference change, as can be easily identified in table 9 (moreover, the applied chi-square test does not show a significant difference of the distribution within the categories compared to the overall marginal distribution). The same is true for the uncategorised scatterplot analysis in figure 4. The regression line only shows a weak tendency to confirm our hypothesis.

We therefore conclude that the first assumption of hypothesis 3 cannot be confirmed; there is no relationship between the importance MPs attach to the smartvote VAA and the magnitude of preference shifts. This again can be interpreted to the delight of VAA operators because the reliability of smartvote answers does not seem to be contingent on the general attitude an MP has adopted towards the tool.

[Table 9]

[Figure 4]

Also regarding *the consideration of official party positions* when answering the smartvote questionnaire, the results do not correspond with theoretical expectations. Table 10 shows no clear pattern which is confirmed by the non-significant results of chi-square statistics. This is corroborated by the scatterplot analysis in figure 5 which does not show any correlation between the two variables.

Thus, the second part of hypothesis 3 is rejected as well which hints that possible party instructions to the smartvote questionnaire might be irrelevant to MP behaviour; MPs seem to obey the instructions only to the

extent that they share the positions.

[Table 10]

[Figure 5]

5. Discussion and conclusion

The paper asks in its title whether politicians keep their pre-election promises once elected. In the theoretical part the authors tried to show that reneging on a promise can have multiple reasons and should not be put on a level with lies and deception. Rather, we addressed the question in a purely empirical way, comparing the MPs' pre-election statements in the Swiss VAA "smartvote" with post-election legislative behaviour. Switzerland's institutional framework seems to be particularly apt to examine this question because of the candidate-centred voting system and the weakness of the party groups in parliament which both add the necessary leeway to the individual MPs in order to keep their promises even against the position of their own party – if they really want to.

A first result comes to the delight of VAA operators: in 85 percent of the cases the MPs voted in parliament exactly the way they pledged before. In other words, incongruence or a shift of revealed MP preferences can only be detected in 15 percent of the cases. The level is highly party-specific, however, and follows the same pattern as the general party unity scores: the lower the party unity the higher the level of preference shifts. This corresponds with the role of the two centrist parties (Christian-democrats and liberal Free Democrats) as majority-building pivots within the Swiss system whose MPs are less consolidated in their political positions and often ready to reconsider their previous attitudes. This point is further underscored by the fact that only GP, SP and SVP show substantially reduced preference shift levels when core issues are at stake while centrist parties are lacking clear definitions about their core issues. As a consequence of all these points the smartvote answers of centrist MPs can be considered less reliable to VAA users than those of leftist or rightist MPs.

A second finding, which is particularly interesting for legislative research, concerns the effect of party group pressure on dissenting MPs. We have seen that "full congruence" between an MP's answer to the smartvote questionnaire, his/her voting behaviour in parliament and the majority position of the own party group is the default option with SP, GP and SVP, while dissenting opinions are more common within FDP and CVP. The question arises, how stable MP preferences are when we are just looking at those cases where an MP's smartvote answer contradicts the party group majority. The result is that the share of those changing their mind in favour of the party group position is more or less the same in all parties (with the exception of the Greens where the results are based on a relatively small n, however). Thus, there is no evidence that some parties exert more rigid disciplinary measures on their members than others.

A third result allows again for a favourable interpretation for VAA operators: The level of preference incongruence is independent of the importance an MP attaches to the tool and of the question if the MP takes into account the official party position when answering the smartvote questionnaire. This means that the reliability of the answers remains the same, irrespective of the personal attitude of an MP towards VAAs, and irrespective of the fact that some parties issue official instructions to their candidates how to answer the questionnaire while others do not. The first point seems reasonable since MPs who do not esteem the value of VAAs in the election campaign at all just do not take part (in 2007 only 6.5 percent of all elected MPs belonged to this group). The second point is interesting because it suggests that possible party instructions for MPs might be irrelevant for their behaviour; MPs seem to obey the instructions to the extent that they share the positions (and thus are right when they say that the party position is important to them) but ignore the instructions if they have dissenting opinions.

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Figure 1: Conceptual setting of the research design

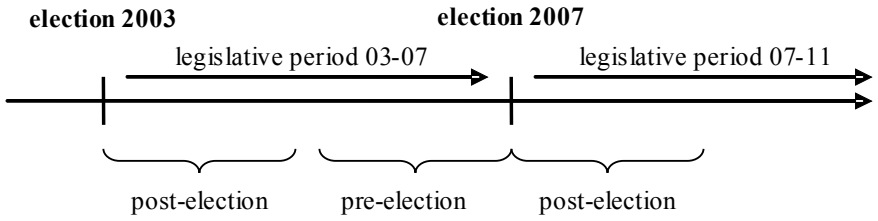
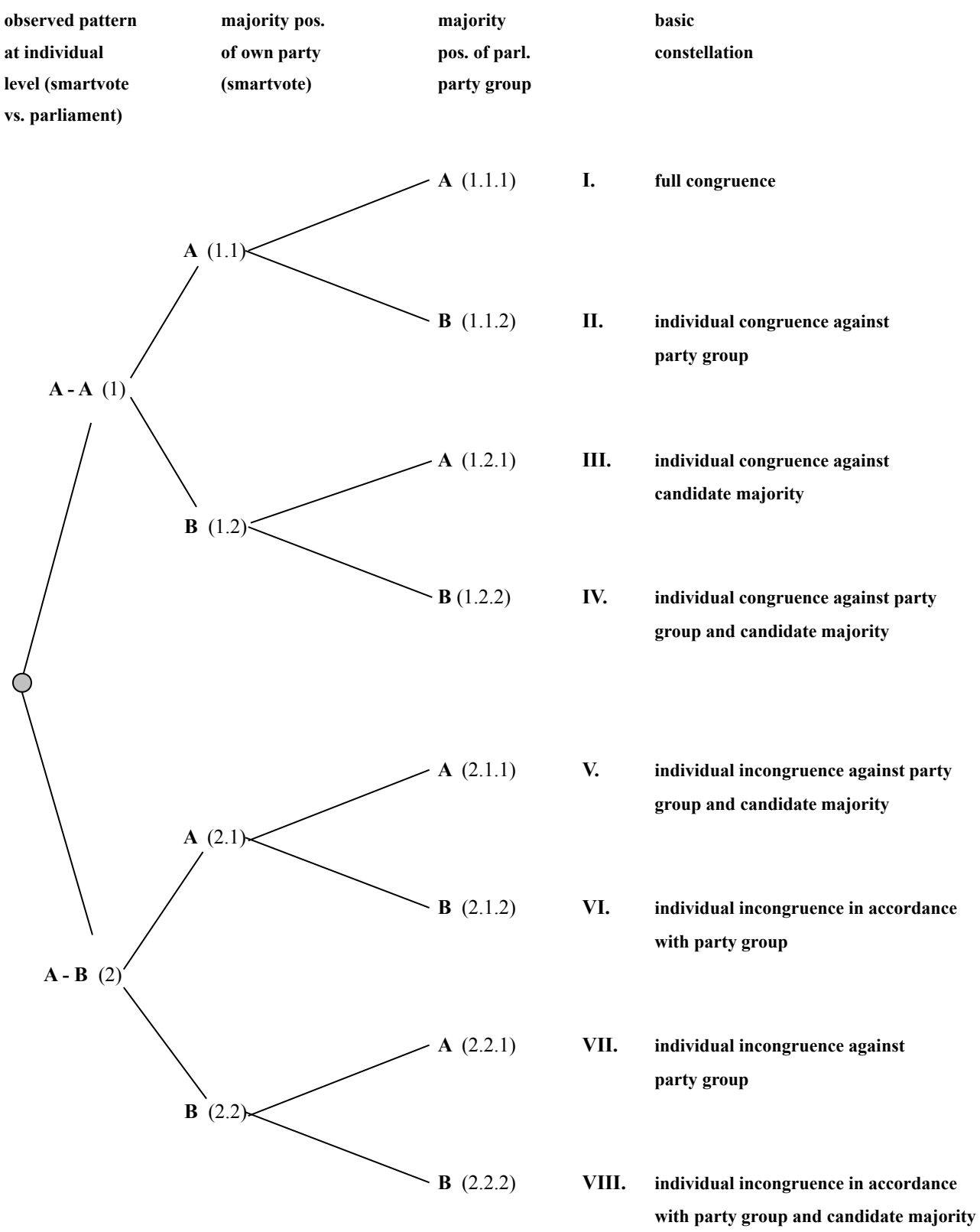


Figure 2: Tree diagram of answer patterns between individual MPs, their national party and their parliamentary party group (eight basic constellations)



Legend: For reading instructions to the diagram, see section 2.3

Table 1: Party unity (Rice index/agreement index) in the Swiss National Council (lower house), average 1996-2005

	Rice-Index[7] (RI)	Agreement-Index[8] (AI)	Standard deviation RI / AI
CVP	0.789	0.820	0.288 / 0.224
FDP	0.818	0.839	0.267 / 0.215
SVP	0.876	0.882	0.219 / 0.191
SP	0.944	0.925	0.165 / 0.173
GP	0.957	0.943	0.153 / 0.154
			N = 7'997 votes

Sources: Schwarz and Linder 2007; own calculations.

Table 2: Core issues of the five largest Swiss parties (smartvote 2007)

	SVP	SP	FDP	CVP	GP
foreign policy	--	--	--	--	--
migration	+	+	--	--	+
society/ethics		+	+	+	
economy	--	+		+	
finances	+	+	+	+	+
social welfare					
environment	--		--	--	+
law & order	+	--			--

Legend:
+ = issues with lowest standard deviation
-- = issues with highest standard deviation

Source: Ladner et al. (2008b: 50-53); own calculations

[7] RI = $|Y - N| / (Y + N)$, whereby Y the number of yeas and N the number of nays (Rice 1925).

[8] Compared to RI, the AI also takes into account abstentions: AI = $\max\{Y,N,A\} - 0.5\ [(Y + N + A) - \max\{Y,N,A\}] / (Y + N + A)$, whereby Y the number of yeas, N the number of nays and A the number of abstentions (Hix *et al*. 2005).

Table 3: Description of the 26 smartvote statements / legislative votes

No.	Issue	Policy area(s)[9]	smartvote version	Date of legislative vote
1	Keeping numerical restrictions on the accreditation of medical practices	--	2003	29 Sep 04
2	Higher spending for nurseries	social welfare, society & ethics	2003	7 Jun 06
3	Higher spending for the armed forces	law & order	2003	9 Dec 03
4	Freedom of choice between military service and alternative civilian service	law & order	2003	14 Dec 05
5	Introduction of English as first foreign language in schools	--	2003	21 Jun 07
6	Keeping reduced VAT rate for tourism services	economy, finances & taxes	2003	16 Dec 05
7	Disclosure of the salaries of board members and CEOs in companies listed on the stock exchange	economy	2003	2 Mar 05
8	Keeping a nationwide network of post office branches	economy	2003	19 Mar 04
9	Privatisation of the national telecommunication supplier "Swisscom"	economy	2003	10 May 06
10	Higher spending for agriculture	economy	2003	1 Dec 04
11	Splitting TV/radio licence fees between public and private TV/radio stations	economy	2003	3 Mar 04
12	Standstill agreement on genetically modified organisms in agriculture and food	economy, environment	2003	14 Jun 05
13	Higher remuneration for MPs	--	2003	8 Oct 04
14	Basic health insurance coverage of complementary medicine (alternative medicine)	social welfare	2007	19 Sep 07
15	Granting nationality at communal level by using the ballot box or a communal assembly	migration	2007	17 Dec 07
16	Legalising the possession and consumption of cannabis	law & order, society & ethics	2007	10 Dec 07
17	Ban on smoking in public buildings, restaurants and bars	economy, society & ethics	2007	14 Oct 07
18	Permission of parallel imports of items protected by patent	economy	2007	15 Dec 08
19	Limitations on the environmental associations' right of appeal	economy, environment	2007	20 Mar 08
20	Introduction of finance referendum at federal level	finances & taxes	2007	20 Mar 08

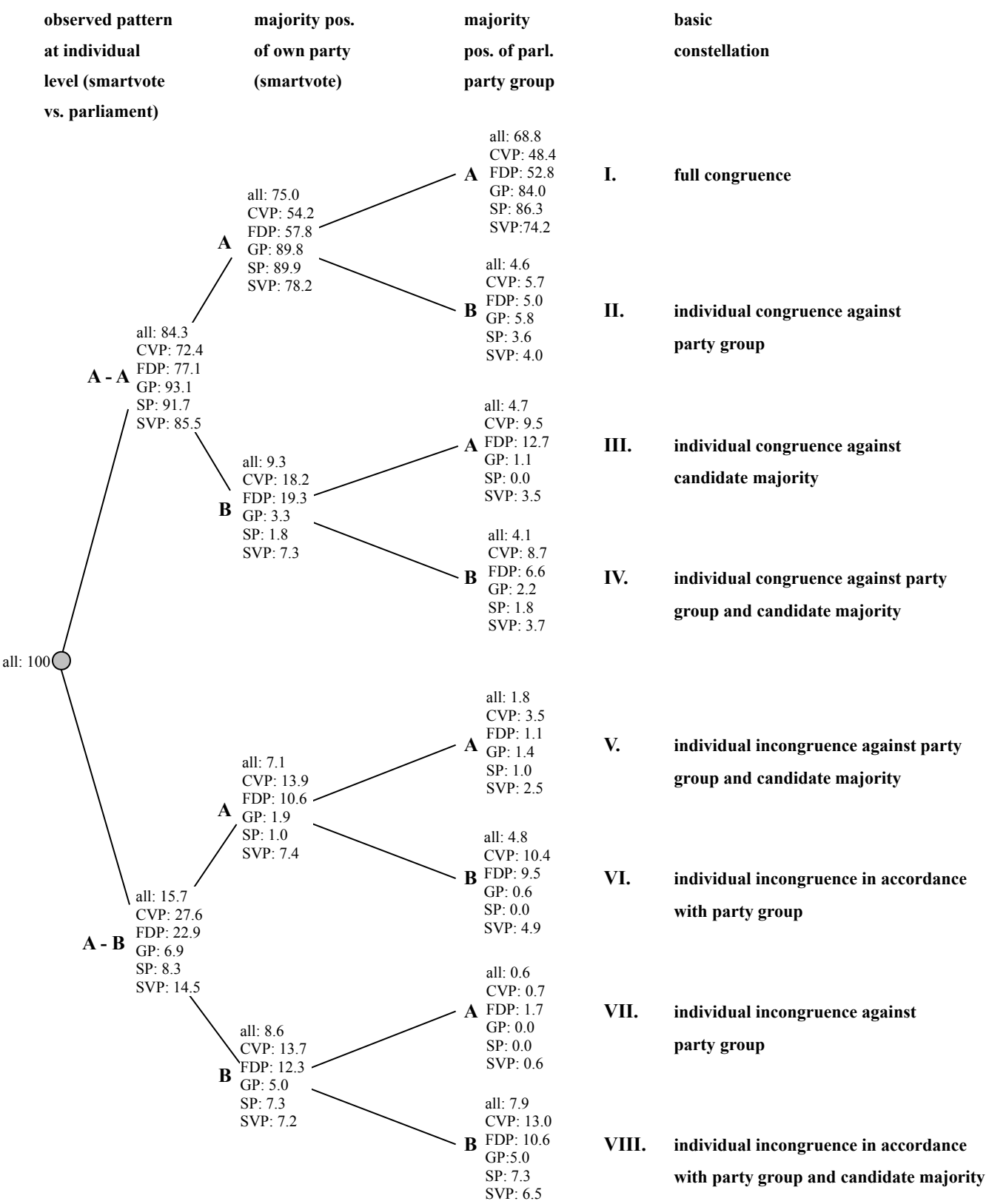
[9] We use the same eight areas as in the so-called "smartspider" chart of smartvote: foreign policy, economy, finances and taxes, law and order, migration, environmental protection, social welfare, society and ethics.

21	Giving young people the right to vote from the age of 16	--	2007	24 Sep 08
22	Toughening the criminal law for juveniles	law & order	2007	19 Dec 07
23	Storing soldiers' service weapons in the armoury	law & order	2007	22 Mar / 27 Sept 07
24	Extending the powers of the security authorities to include the preventative monitoring of postal, telephone and email traffic	law & order, society & ethics	2007	17 Dec 08
25	Extending the free movement of peoples between Switzerland and the EU to Bulgaria and Romania	foreign policy, economy, migration	2007	28 May 08
26	Higher spending in the field of development aid	foreign policy, finances & taxes	2007	10 Jun 08

Table 4: Transformation of the answers to the smartvote questionnaires and the legislative voting behaviour into the dependent variable "preference incongruence"

	legislative behaviour:		
	yea	nay	abstention
smartvote answer:			
1. binary data: tree diagram			
fully agree	0	1	1
weakly agree	0	1	0
weakly disagree	1	0	0
fully disagree	1	0	1
2. metric variable: hypothesis testing			
fully agree	0	1	0.5
weakly agree	0.25	0.75	0.25
weakly disagree	0.75	0.25	0.25
fully disagree	1	0	0.5

Figure 3: Tree diagram of answer patterns between individual MPs, their national party and their parliamentary party group: total percentages per party



Legend: For reading instructions to the diagram, see section 4.2.1

Table 5: Percentages and absolute numbers of the tree diagram analysis in figure 3

constellation:		**1**		**1.1**		**1.2**		**(I) 1.1.1**		**(II) 1.1.2**		**(III) 1.2.1**		**(IV) 1.2.2**		**2**		**2.1**		**2.2**		**(V) 2.1.1**		**(VI) 2.1.2**		**(VII) 2.2.1**		**(VIII) 2.2.2**	
total percentages	*N*	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
all MPs	*3751*	84.3	3162	75.0	2815	9.3	347	68.8	2579	4.6	171	4.7	176	4.1	153	15.7	589	7.1	266	8.6	323	1.8	66	4.8	179	0.6	21	7.9	295
GP	*362*	93.1	337	89.8	325	3.3	12	84.0	304	5.8	21	1.1	4	2.2	8	6.9	25	1.9	7	5.0	18	1.4	5	0.6	2	0.0	0	5.0	18
SVP	*965*	85.5	825	78.2	755	7.3	70	74.2	716	4.0	39	3.5	34	3.7	36	14.5	140	7.4	71	7.2	69	2.5	24	4.9	47	0.6	6	6.5	63
SP	*1029*	91.7	944	89.9	925	1.8	19	86.3	888	3.6	37	0.0	0	1.8	19	8.3	85	1.0	10	7.3	75	1.0	10	0.0	0	0.0	0	7.3	75
FDP	*545*	77.1	420	57.8	315	19.3	105	52.8	288	5.0	27	12.7	69	6.6	36	22.9	125	10.6	58	12.3	67	1.1	6	9.5	52	1.7	9	10.6	58
CVP	*576*	72.4	417	54.2	312	18.2	105	48.4	279	5.7	33	9.5	55	8.7	50	27.6	159	13.9	80	13.7	79	3.5	20	10.4	60	0.7	4	13.0	75

Table 6: Preference (in)concgruence when party group (PG) majority and MP smartvote answer are dissenting (constellations II, IV, VI, VIII)

		Preference stability MP = A-A; PG = B		**Preference instability MP = A-B, PG = B**	
	N (100%)	n	%	n	%
all MPs	798	324	40.6	474	59.4
CVP	218	83	38.1	135	61.9
FDP	173	63	36.4	110	63.6
GP	49	29	59.2	20	40.8
SP	131	56	42.7	75	57.3
SVP	185	75	40.5	110	59.5

Table 7: Mean preference change and unity score per party group

	party unity level	**mean preference change** (a)	**no. of MPs included**
SP	high	0.105	61
GP	high	0.110	29
SVP	middle	0.146	62
FDP	low	0.257	50
CVP	low	0.296	44
Total N			*246*

Legend: (a) Scale from 0-1, 0 indicating no preference change, 1 indicating a preference shift on each issue.

Table 8: Mean preference change by party group and issue salience

	mean preference change (a)			**no. of MPs included**
	core issues	**other issues**	**diff. %**	
SP	0.087	0.131	+51.3	61
GP	0.073	0.116	+59.1	29
SVP	0.107	0.206	+92.0	62
FDP	0.274	0.242	-11.5	50
CVP	0.268	0.287	+6.9	44
Total N				*246*

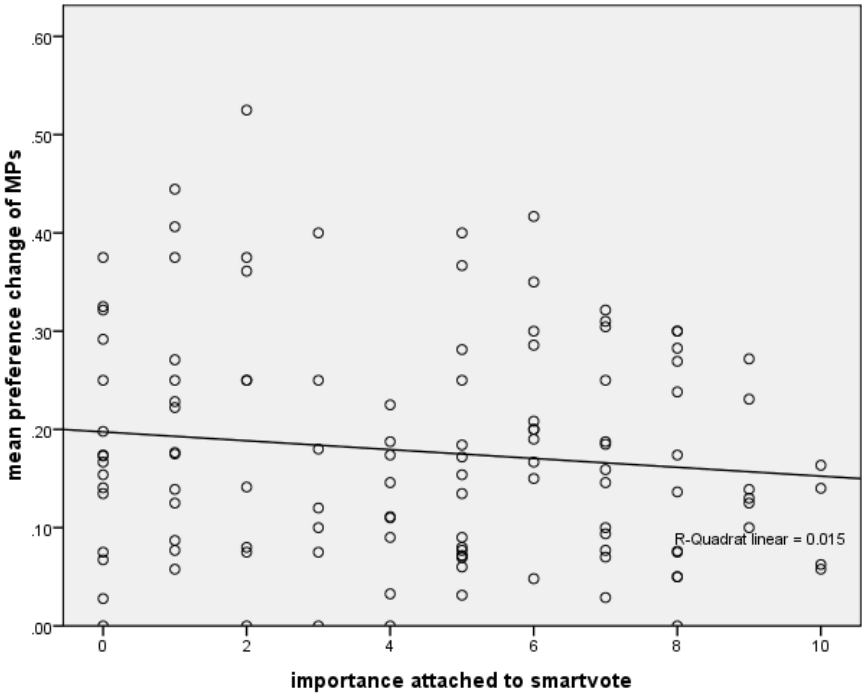
Legend: (a) Scale from 0-1, 0 indicating no preference change, 1 indicating a preference shift on each issue.

Table 9: Preference change level by importance of smartvote (all parties)

		level of preference change			
		low	middle	high	*total*
importance of smartvote	low	19	17	10	*46*
		(34.5%)	(37.8%)	(58.8%)	*(39.3%)*
	middle	17	15	4	*36*
		(30.9%)	(33.3%)	(23.5%)	*(30.8%)*
	high	19	13	3	*35*
		(34.5%)	(28.9%)	(17.6%)	*(29.9%)*
	total	*55*	*45*	*17*	*117*
		(100%)	*(100%)*	*(100%)*	*(100%)*

Chi-Square (Pearson): 3.642

Figure 4: Scatterplot of importance of smartvote and mean preference change



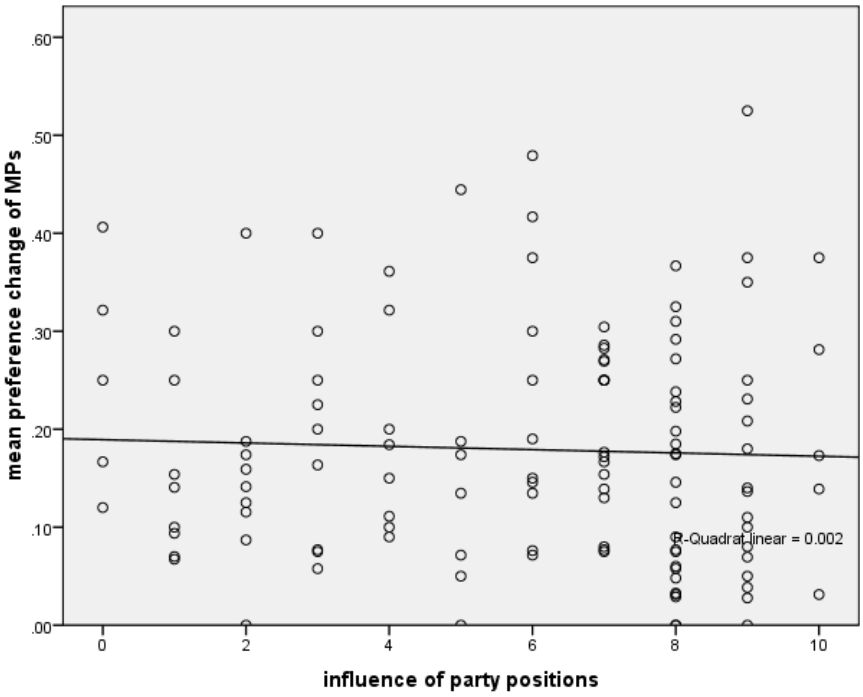
N=117

Table 10: Preference change level by influence of party positions (all parties)

		level of preference change			
		low	middle	high	*total*
influence of party positions	low	14 (24.6%)	13 (28.3%)	4 (22.2%)	*31* *(25.6%)*
	middle	13 (22.8%)	7 (15.2%)	6 (33.3%)	*26* *(21.5%)*
	high	30 (52.6%)	26 (56.5%)	8 (44.4%)	*64* *(52.9%)*
	total	*57* *(100%)*	*46* *(100%)*	*18* *(100%)*	*121* *(100%)*

Chi-Square (Pearson): 2.653

Figure 5: Scatterplot of influence of party positions and mean preference change



N=121