

Schib, Tobias; Strebel, Michael; Stutzer, Alois

Working Paper

Latent political engagement: Insights from new measures for local democracy

WWZ Working Paper, No. 2025/03

Provided in Cooperation with:

Center of Business and Economics (WWZ), University of Basel

Suggested Citation: Schib, Tobias; Strebel, Michael; Stutzer, Alois (2025) : Latent political engagement: Insights from new measures for local democracy, WWZ Working Paper, No. 2025/03, University of Basel, Center of Business and Economics (WWZ), Basel

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/333517>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



University
of Basel

Faculty of
Business and Economics



May 2025

Latent Political Engagement: Insights from New Measures for Local Democracy

WWZ Working Paper 2025/03

Tobias Schib, Michael A. Strebel, Alois Stutzer

A publication of the Center of Business and Economics (WWZ), University of Basel.

© WWZ 2025 and the authors. Reproduction for other purposes than the personal use needs the permission of the author

Universität Basel
Peter Merian-Weg 6
4052 Basel, Switzerland
wwz.unibas.ch

Corresponding Author:
Prof. Dr. Alois Stutzer
Tel. +41 61 207 33 61
Mail: alois.stutzer@unibas.ch

Latent Political Engagement: Insights from New Measures for Local Democracy

Tobias Schib* Michael A. Strebel[†] Alois Stutzer[‡]

May 7, 2025

Abstract

A functioning democracy relies on individuals motivated to take on political office. In recent decades, concerns have grown across Western democracies about increasing political alienation and a declining willingness among citizens to engage in politics. To systematically assess this phenomenon, we introduce the concept of *latent political engagement* defined as an underlying, non-specific motivation to take on the responsibilities of a political mandate, whether or not it ultimately results in an actual candidacy. To capture it, we propose four survey questions. We fielded them using a large-scale, nationally representative survey of Swiss citizens in 2023. We present descriptive evidence for differences across various socio-economic groups and contextual factors. In particular, we find that individuals who are deeply invested in their municipality – whether through homeownership (economic capital) or membership in local associations (social capital) – exhibit higher levels of latent political engagement. Moreover, municipality size emerges as a key predictor, with small jurisdictions being particularly conducive to fostering a willingness to take on political mandates. Additionally, we provide evidence of language-cultural differences, as native German-speaking individuals are substantially more likely than French speakers to have ever considered holding political office.

Keywords: Local democracy, political engagement, political ambition, political selection

JEL classification: D72, J45

*University of Basel, Faculty of Business and Economics, Peter Merian-Weg 6, 4002 Basel, Switzerland; Email: tobias.schib@unibas.ch; ORCID: [0009-0007-1872-5543](https://orcid.org/0009-0007-1872-5543).

[†]University of Bern, KPM Center for Public Management, Schanzeneckstrasse 1, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; Email: michael.strebel@unibe.ch; ORCID: [0000-0002-8983-8867](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8983-8867).

[‡]University of Basel, Faculty of Business and Economics, Peter Merian-Weg 6, 4002 Basel, Switzerland; Email: alois.stutzer@unibas.ch; ORCID: [0000-0002-7410-5513](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7410-5513).

We are grateful to Patrick Balles, Reiner Eichenberger, Bruno Frey, Benjamin Jansen, Kelly Liu and Margit Osterloh for helpful comments, and to the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG) for the possibility to collaborate in the survey “How are you, Switzerland?”. Furthermore, we thank Marc Pouget for excellent research assistance.

1 Introduction

A crucial prerequisite for a functioning democracy is individuals willing to take on political office. When many can imagine themselves holding elected office, it suggests a broad-based democracy, offering favorable conditions for representative political bodies. A better understanding of the willingness to take over political responsibility can thus serve as a starting point for a systematic analysis of political selection from the supply side.

To address this issue, we propose the theoretical concept of *latent political engagement*, which encompasses both internal (or intrinsic) motivation and extrinsic motives to assume the responsibilities of a political mandate. We complement this concept with a set of concrete survey questions for measurement. Using a representative sample of respondents from Switzerland, we systematically analyze important covariates of the proposed construct along three dimensions, i.e., i) individual socio-economic characteristics, including people’s largely locally bound economic and social capital, ii) the local context, encompassing municipal organization and its transformation through municipal mergers, and iii) the conditions at the state (or cantonal) level, specifically language-cultural and formal institutional factors.

Our research addresses both the fundamental question of who is willing to represent fellow citizens and the practical question of who can imagine filling one of the many political positions in a democratic society. Regarding the former, there is growing concern that people disengage from politics and fewer and fewer people are willing to serve in elected office. Regarding the latter, there is an estimated 520,000 political positions in a federal democracy such as the United States ([Poliengine 2022](#)). In Switzerland, despite being around 40 times smaller than the U.S., there are still around 100,000 political offices at the local level alone ([Freitag et al. 2019](#)). Due to its extensive militia system in municipal government, the median Swiss municipality with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants has around four political positions per 100 residents (own calculation based on [Ladner et al. 2021](#)). The high “density” of political offices in Switzerland and other (federal) democracies requires a substantial share of citizens to take on political mandates.

Our goal is to understand who possesses and what contextual factors influence the latent willingness to engage in politics, which eventually translates into actual political candidacy. We define latent political engagement as an *underlying non-specific motivation to take over the responsibilities of a political mandate*. This conceptualization encompasses both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational aspects and is related to [Fox and Lawless’s \(2005\)](#) concept of “nascent political ambition”, defined as “the embryonic or potential interest in office-seeking that precedes the actual decision to enter a specific political contest” (p. 643). With our concept, we contribute to the broader literature on the supply of political candidates, as part of the theory of political selection in economics, political science, and political sociology (e.g., [Besley 2005](#); [Mansbridge 2009](#); [Braendle and Stutzer 2019](#); [Gulzar 2021](#)). In our theoretical considerations of the determinants of latent political engagement, we consider both extrinsic factors, such as cost-benefit rationales (e.g., [Osborne and Slivinski 1996](#);

Besley 2005; Dal Bó et al. 2013) and strategic considerations of political opportunities that foster political ambition (e.g., Schlesinger 1966; Black 1972; Levine and Hyde 1977), as well as intrinsic motivational aspects, including public service motivation (e.g., Weber 2004; Broockman 2013) and the motivation to volunteer (e.g., Freeman 1997). Regarding the latter, we specifically account for the “importance of being asked” as a potential catalyst for whether individuals seriously consider taking on a political office.

Based on the conceptual considerations, we propose four survey questions to measure the latent willingness to enter politics:

1. *“Have you ever considered taking on a political office?”*
2. *“Have you ever been asked to take on a political office?”*
3. *“If you were asked, could you imagine taking on a political office?”*
4. *“Do you hold or have you ever held a political office?”*

These questions were fielded in a large survey in 2023 involving approximately 11,000 citizens eligible to hold political mandates in their municipality or canton of residence as well as at the federal level.¹ Through multiple regression analyses, which flexibly control for canton-specific determinants of latent political engagement, we derive several insights. Consistent with a substantial body of literature in political sociology, we find that women are significantly less likely than men to have seriously considered political engagement or to state a willingness to take on a political mandate if asked. There is no clear age gradient on whether individuals have ever considered taking on political roles. However, the finding that younger age cohorts are more willing to accept a political office if asked, yet are less likely to have been asked, suggests unused potential in political recruitment. Additionally, education level is strongly and positively associated with latent political engagement. We find no clear income effect, which challenges a narrow opportunity cost rationale. In line with the homevoter hypothesis (Fischel 2001a,b), we find evidence that homeowners exhibit higher latent political engagement than renters, ceteris paribus. Social capital, as reflected in active involvement in associations, is strongly and positively associated with the latent willingness to take on a political office.

In examining the local contextual influences on latent political engagement, the size of the municipality emerges as a significant determinant. Individuals from small villages, with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, are much more likely to have considered entering politics and would be more inclined to do so if asked, compared to those from larger municipalities. However, there is no evidence of a continuous effect related to municipality size, as other size groups exhibit relatively similar average levels of latent political engagement. Regarding the organization of the local legislative, whether

¹Foreigners with a permanent residence permit are eligible to run for local political offices in four cantons and in select municipalities within two other cantons. Since federal offices require Swiss nationality, our analysis focuses exclusively on citizens.

through a parliament or a municipal assembly, our findings suggest that individuals with the opportunity to engage in local parliament offices are not more likely to consider holding political office. However, we identify a clear demand-side effect associated with municipal parliaments: the likelihood of having been asked to run for office or of having already held political office is higher compared to municipalities with assemblies. This effect is likely attributable to the increased number of political offices available in municipalities with a parliament.

Community identification and attachment are further local contextual factors that might have an influence on latent political engagement. A municipal merger, especially one involving a name change, has the potential to alter residents' connection to their jurisdiction. We find that respondents living in municipalities that merged in the past are, on average, less willing to take on political office if asked compared to those in municipalities without a merger history. However, a similar tendency appears in municipalities where a merger attempt failed, suggesting that low latent political engagement or recruitment difficulties may drive mergers rather than result from them. To address potential selection effects, we compare municipalities with failed versus successful mergers and find no evidence that past mergers reduce the willingness to take on political office, on average. However, the impact varies by living situation: homeowners in the post-merger municipality are more likely than tenants to consider political office. We attribute this differential effect to their stronger incentives to engage in political decisions of the new municipality that likely influence property values.

Regarding the conditions at the cantonal level, neither the extent of local autonomy nor of direct democratic rights can explain the large regional variation in latent political engagement that we observe. However, our findings point to cultural differences along language divides: German-speaking respondents are more likely than French-speaking individuals to have ever considered holding political office. This result remains robust when restricting the analysis to linguistic variation within cantons, flexibly controlling for unobserved institutional differences across cantons.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents our measurement strategy and the data. In Section 3, the empirical strategy is introduced. Sections 4 to 6 theoretically embed the three dimensions (i.e., individual, local, cantonal) along which we study the covariates of latent political engagement and document the related empirical findings. Section 7 offers some concluding remarks.

2 Measurement and core data

Switzerland offers a particularly relevant context for studying latent political engagement. Due to its federal and highly decentralized political system, citizens have extensive opportunities for direct democratic participation and involvement in political offices through the so-called “militia system”. The term means that the vast majority of political positions in Switzerland – particularly at the sub-national level – are filled by citizens who serve part-time in an honorary capacity with only modest compensation, rather than by full-time career politicians (see, e.g., [Müller 2015](#); [Freitag et al. 2019](#)).

This political system, however, is not unique to Switzerland. Local political offices in other Western democracies, such as those in the United States (e.g., [Zale 2019](#)) or Germany (e.g., [Kletzing and Lukoschat 2014](#)), are organized in a similar way. Switzerland, however, stands out due to the sheer demand for local politicians; approximately 100,000 municipal-level political offices exist today ([Freitag et al. 2019](#)).²

To systematically collect statistics on latent political engagement for the first time, we participated in a large-scale survey titled “How are you, Switzerland?” (*Wie geht’s, Schweiz?*), conducted between April 3 and May 8, 2023, by the survey institute *gfs.bern* on behalf of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation *SRG* ([Bieri et al. 2023a](#)). The primary objective of the survey was to assess the Swiss population’s satisfaction with various aspects of social and economic life. We added specific questions to the questionnaire to explore respondents’ latent willingness to engage in political office.

From a total of 8,921 Swiss respondents of legal age, we have data on both latent and actual political engagement, as well as information on socio-economic characteristics and the place of residence at the zipcode level, which is crucial for examining the contextual factors we aim to investigate.³ Of these observations, 2,327 were collected through a representative, stratum quota-based survey. The remaining observations were obtained via river sampling, where participants opted into the survey after encountering an advertisement on *SRG*’s online media channels. To ensure a representative sample, *gfs.bern* applied a weighting procedure that adjusted for regional, socio-demographic, and political orientation differences between the two samples.⁴

In the survey, we first made respondents aware of the various political offices available in Switzerland. We presented them the following statement (translated into English):

“From the local to the national level, there are numerous political offices, such as those in municipal, city, or government councils, as well as in municipal, cantonal, or federal parliaments, or in social, building, or audit commissions.”

After this statement, we asked them four questions with corresponding response items:

1. *“Have you ever considered taking on a political office?”*
[“seriously considered”] [“vaguely considered”] [“no”] [“don’t know”]
2. *“Have you ever been asked to take on a political office?”*
[“yes”] [“no”] [“don’t know”]
3. *“If you were asked, could you imagine taking on a political office?”*
[“yes”] [“rather yes”] [“rather not”] [“no”] [“don’t know”]

²For comparison, Germany has around 200,000 honorary local political offices, plus approximately 3,500 full-time mayors in larger municipalities ([Stern.de 2024](#); [Dietz 2024](#)). In the United States, as mentioned before, there are an estimated 500,000 local politicians ([Poliengine 2022](#)).

³The 8,921 observations are spread over 1,463 municipalities and 26 cantons.

⁴For detailed information on the sampling procedure and weighting, see [Bieri et al. \(2023b\)](#).

4. “Do you hold or have you ever held a political office?”

[“yes”] [“no”] [“don’t know”]

Question (1) asks whether the thought of taking on a political mandate has ever crossed the respondent’s mind. This question is similar to inquiries found in the political science literature on political ambition (see, e.g., [Fox and Lawless 2005, 2010](#); [Lawless 2012](#); [Crowder-Meyer 2020](#); [Gulzar 2021](#)). However, political candidacies often result from recruitment efforts rather than solely on a candidate’s own initiative. So-called “electoral gatekeepers”, such as members and leaders of political parties, public authorities, or retiring politicians, frequently play a pivotal role in candidate emergence by actively approaching and encouraging people to run for office (see [Fox and Lawless 2010](#) for the USA). In Switzerland, particularly at the sub-national level, there is substantial evidence that candidacies are far more likely to result from such external stimuli rather than from personal initiative ([Geser et al. 2011](#); [Freitag et al. 2019](#)). This may be due to the vast majority of political offices in Switzerland operating on a part-time basis with compensation typically below what individuals could earn with the same time in a regular occupation (e.g., [Müller 2015](#)). As a result, this kind of political work has aspects of voluntary work, where research has consistently highlighted the “importance of being asked” in triggering pro-social behavior (see, e.g., [Freeman 1997](#); [Andreoni and Rao 2011](#); [Stutzer et al. 2011](#); [Andreoni et al. 2017](#)). Question (2) is therefore designed to determine whether respondents have ever been asked to take on a political office. The responses to Question (1) are naturally associated with those of Question (2), as the consideration of a political candidacy may precisely emerge due to the suggestion of an electoral gatekeeper. Question (3) then places respondents in a hypothetical scenario where the answer potentially indicates how they would respond if someone approached them with the opportunity to take on a political office. Question (4) finally assesses whether respondents have ever held, or currently hold, a political mandate. If the answer is yes, this means that their latent willingness to take on a political office has translated into an actual candidacy.

For a random subsample of roughly 1,000 respondents, we slightly modified the four questions on (latent) political engagement to explore whether responses differed when focusing exclusively on local-level engagement. In this subsample, we added the phrase “in your municipality of residence” to all four questions and listed only examples of local offices in the opening statement.⁵ As shown in Figure A.1 in Appendix A, there does not appear to be a significant difference in responses, on average. Still, we control for the type of question in our multiple regression analyses later on.

⁵The opening statement for this subsample is (translated into English): “Locally, there are numerous political offices, such as those in municipal or city councils, as well as in municipal parliaments, or in social, building, or audit commissions.”

3 Empirical strategy

We estimate linear probability models of the following form:

$$\begin{aligned}
 engagement_{i,m,c} = & \alpha + \beta_1 * female_{i,m,c} + \beta_2 * age_{i,m,c} + \beta_3 * education_{i,m,c} + \beta_4 * income_{i,m,c} \\
 & + \beta_5 * employment_{i,m,c} + \beta_6 * owner_{i,m,c} + \beta_7 * association_{i,m,c} \\
 & + \delta_1 * pop_{m,c} + \delta_2 * legislative_{m,c} + \delta_3 * longterm_{m,c} + \delta_4 * commuters_{m,c} \\
 & + \rho_c + \epsilon_{i,m,c}
 \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

Engagement of individual i , living in municipality m and canton c , refers to the four measures of (latent) political engagement introduced earlier. Each of these variables is binary (0/1), with a value of 1 assigned to the following responses: “*seriously considered*” and “*vaguely considered*” for Question (1), “*yes*” for Question (2), “*yes*” and “*rather yes*” for Question (3), and “*yes*” for Question (4).⁶ We regress these four dependent variables on a set of socio-economic categorical variables, including gender, age, education, income and employment status.⁷ The variable “*owner*” is coded 1 if the respondent owns a house in his or her municipality of residence.⁸ The variable “*association*” indicates whether the individual is an active member of at least one association. In supplementary regressions, we further break down associational membership into categories based on the purpose of the association, such as social, religious, educational/arts, environmental, political, sports, and others. We will not display the coefficients for the “*other*” categories related to the “*education*”, the “*owner*”, and the “*association*” variables when we present the results, but they are included in the estimations throughout.

Additionally, we study local contextual covariates: the size of the municipality “*pop*” as of the end of 2022 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2023a), whether the municipality has an assembly, a parliament, or neither (Ladner 2016; Ladner et al. 2021; own research),⁹ the share of residents living in the municipality for more than 10 years as of the end of 2022 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2023c), and the share of commuters in the municipality in 2020 (Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2023b). We further consider canton fixed effects (ρ), control for the survey question type (see Section 2), and allow for differences in levels of (latent) political engagement between the river sample and the stratum quota-based sample.

⁶Responses coded as 0 include: “*no*” for Question (1), “*no*” for Question (2), “*no*” and “*rather not*” for Question (3), and “*no*” for Question (4).

⁷Income refers to the net monthly income of the respondent’s household.

⁸In the questionnaire, respondents answering the question “What is your housing situation?” could select from renting, home ownership, or “don’t know/no answer”. Of the 120 respondents who chose “don’t know/no answer”, 66 – more than half – were under the age of 25. It is plausible that many of these individuals still live with their parents and therefore neither rent nor own a home. We categorized these responses as “*other*” and included them in the estimation.

⁹The third category within the municipal legislative variable includes individuals who reside in municipalities that have no longer a municipal assembly, but all proposals are decided by the electorate in referendum votes at the ballot box (referred to as “ballot”). Since this affects only a few municipalities, and only 60 individuals in our sample live in such municipalities, we will not show and interpret the estimates for this group.

The regression results from the estimations based on Equation (1) for the four dependent variables are presented step by step across Sections 4 and 5.1. To analyze the impact of municipal mergers on latent political engagement in Section 5.2, we extend Equation (1) by incorporating a set of explanatory variables related to the merger history of each municipality (see Table 2). In Section 6, where we examine the influence of culture and formal political institutions that vary across cantons, we extend Equation (1) by including the interview language chosen by respondents in the survey, along with measures of direct democracy and local autonomy at the cantonal level (while leaving out canton fixed effects). Additionally, in this section, we cluster the standard errors at the cantonal level rather than the municipal level.

Table A.1 in Appendix A presents the cross-correlations among the measures of (latent) political engagement. As expected, latent political engagement measured by Question (1) is strongly and positively correlated with responses to “*Ever been asked to take on political office*” and “*Ever held political office*”. Responses to Question (3) also show a positive correlation, though to a lesser degree, which aligns with the question design: respondents may imagine taking on a political office even if they have never been confronted with a real opportunity to do so.

Table B.1 in Appendix B presents the levels of (latent) political engagement, broken down by various socio-economic and contextual factors. Across the entire sample, 18% of respondents have seriously and 25% vaguely considered taking on a political office, while 15% could imagine and 27% would rather imagine doing so if asked. Approximately 31% have already been asked to take on a political mandate, and about 16% currently hold or have held a political office before.

Before studying the multiple regression results in the following sections, it is informative to look at some of the bivariate relationships. We generated bar charts to illustrate the bivariate relationships between key socio-economic characteristics and (latent) political engagement (see Figures B.1 to B.4 in Appendix B). The main findings are summarized as follows: First, there is a substantial gender gap in latent political engagement: women are 17 percentage points less likely than men to have seriously or vaguely considered taking on a political office and 16 percentage points less likely to be willing to do so if asked. Second, having ever considered a candidacy is – maybe surprisingly – not strictly increasing in age. This might be because there are indeed strong cohort effects or because respondents interpret the question within a relatively recent time frame and not over their lifetime. Suggestive of cohort effects, the groups most likely to consider taking on a political office if asked consist of the younger age groups. Third, education is strongly positively correlated with latent and actual political engagement. Respondents with a university degree are significantly more likely to express willingness to take on a political office compared to those with vocational education. Fourth, lower-income groups exhibit lower levels of latent political engagement compared to higher-income groups.

4 Individual-level covariates of latent political engagement

In an economic theory of political selection (see, e.g., [Besley 2005](#); [Mansbridge 2009](#); [Braendle and Stutzer 2019](#) for reviews), the supply of political candidates can be modeled as a cost-benefit calculation. A candidacy is pursued if the expected net benefit – the expected benefit if elected minus the candidacy costs – exceeds the benefits of alternative uses of time (e.g., [Osborne and Slivinski 1996](#); [Besley 2005](#); [Dal Bó et al. 2013](#)). Applied to latent political engagement, this framework suggests that individuals who have seriously considered or would be willing to take on a political office if asked are those who weight the benefits and costs of such a position and find it an attractive ratio. This perspective aligns with the traditional political science literature on political ambition which views political candidacies as the outcome of strategic considerations of political opportunities (see, e.g., [Schlesinger 1966](#); [Black 1972](#); [Levine and Hyde 1977](#)). The more appealing a political office – whether in terms of monetary returns while in or after leaving office, prestige or power – the more likely an individual is to consider taking on a political office. The same holds if she or he has a higher expected probability of being elected (such as due to a vacant seat) or faces poor outside options.

Drawing from this rational choice framework on candidate supply, we can hypothesize how socio-economic factors might influence latent political engagement. For instance, higher income and education lead to higher opportunity costs for holding a political mandate, expected to discourage well-off individuals from considering a political office. Conversely, income and education also signal competence, which could increase the probability of being elected and thus enhance the likelihood of having ever given political engagement a serious thought. This can be related to age. While competence may increase with age, so do opportunity costs, particularly if private and public sector wages outside of politics rise with seniority. Retired individuals present an interesting case: their opportunity costs of time to engage in politics are much lower than for those still working. However, they may also face higher direct costs, as they cannot as easily draw on resources related to their work environment anymore.

The theoretical considerations thus far have emphasized extrinsic motives that might lead individuals to consider taking on a political office. However, our conceptualization of latent political engagement encompasses both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational aspects and the derived survey questions are not specific to any particular political position or mandate. Our measures thus likely capture a broader willingness to serve in a political office rather than a calculated response to a specific political opportunity. This suggests that narrow, office-specific factors that drive actual candidacies might be less relevant for the general willingness to take on a political mandate (see [Fox and Lawless 2005](#) for similar arguments related to their concept of “nascent political ambition”). Instead, intrinsic motivations could play a significant role in the general willingness to engage politically. In fact, the vast majority of political offices in Switzerland operate within a political system, which, as discussed in Section 2, at least partly follows the idea of volunteer labor. In his seminal work, [Freeman \(1997\)](#) characterizes volunteering as a “conscience good”. He argues that volunteering is a public good that

people have a “*latent demand*” for (p. 164), which materializes into active engagement when they are asked to volunteer. This framework might well fit the situation with political offices like school boards or local councils: these positions are valued for their service to the public, yet there is an incentive to free-ride, i.e., to rely on others to take them up. Consequently, socio-demographic characteristics and contextual factors that foster an intrinsic motivation to serve the community may be crucial to understand latent political engagement.¹⁰

4.1 Demographic and socio-economic characteristics

Table 1 presents the empirical estimation results for the demographic and socio-economic covariates of (latent) political engagement. First, we observe a substantial gender gap: *ceteris paribus*, women are 15 percentage points less likely than men to have either considered political engagement or state willingness to take on a political mandate if asked. It is precisely estimated and only slightly less than the 17 percentage point gap observed in the bivariate analysis in Table B.1. This suggests that even after accounting for a wide range of covariates, including education, income, employment status, living situation, and membership in clubs, the difference in latent political engagement across genders persists. This finding is consistent with a large body of literature that explores and documents the gender gap in political ambition, primarily in the U.S. but also in Europe (e.g., [Fox and Lawless 2004, 2005, 2010, 2014](#); [Lawless and Fox 2010](#); [Lawless 2012](#); [Dahl and Nyrup 2021](#); [Coffé et al. 2022](#); [Devroe et al. 2023](#)).

Second, we find no clear pattern for age on whether individuals have ever considered taking on a political office, now *ceteris paribus*. This is surprising given that the likelihood of having been asked to run for office and of having held an office both increase sharply with age. As alluded to before, one reason might be that respondents interpret the question with regard to a time frame referring to recent years. Another reason might be pronounced cohort effects. In this respect, it is interesting that younger age groups appear more willing to consider a political office if asked. This suggests an untapped potential in political recruitment, as younger people are less likely to have been asked to run for office but indicate a higher willingness to do so if asked than their older counterparts. To test this idea, we re-estimate the specification using a new dependent variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent indicated they would consider taking on a political office if asked but have never been asked before, and 0 otherwise. As shown in Figure B.5 in Appendix B, the predicted probability of an untapped potential for political recruitment is highest among younger age cohorts.¹¹

¹⁰According to a large-scale survey conducted by [Freitag et al. \(2019\)](#) among municipal politicians across Switzerland, the most common reason given for political involvement was the desire to actively engage for the good of their communities. In contrast, monetary returns were mentioned far less often. Evidence from local politics in other Western democracies also suggests that money may not be the primary motivation for local politicians (see, e.g., [Berg 2020](#) for evidence from Sweden).

¹¹Apart from a lower predicted untapped potential among women compared to men, we observe no substantial differences across categories for other covariates (see Figure B.6).

Third, regarding education, individuals with a university degree, and to some extent those with higher vocational qualifications, exhibit substantially higher levels of latent political engagement and are more likely to have held political office compared to those with vocational education.

Fourth, we observe no clear relationship with income contrary to the hypothesis that higher-income individuals are less willing to be involved in political mandates due to higher opportunity costs. There is also no systematic pattern for employment status *ceteris paribus*, with the exception that self-employed individuals (in comparison to employees) exhibit a higher likelihood of having seriously or vaguely considered political engagement and of having been asked to run for office. However, self-employed individuals are not more likely to state a willingness to take on a political office if asked or to have held office in the past, which may be attributed to the time constraints associated with self-employment.

Finally, there is some evidence that homeowners have more likely ever considered political office than renters, and strong evidence that they are more likely to have actually held or currently hold political office. This is consistent with the homevoter hypothesis (Fischel 2001a,b), which posits that homeowners have an incentive to control local governments because local policies affect property values. Our finding is consistent with studies on the positive relationship between home ownership and political participation in the U.S. (e.g., Yoder 2020; Hall and Yoder 2022).

Table 1: Demographic and socio-economic covariates of (latent) political engagement

Dep. variable	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Gender (male)				
female	-0.1541*** (0.0216)	-0.1513*** (0.0220)	-0.0695*** (0.0205)	-0.0469*** (0.0153)
Age (18-24)				
25-34	0.0835 (0.0584)	-0.0602 (0.0643)	0.0993*** (0.0377)	0.0376 (0.0279)
35-44	0.0117 (0.0596)	-0.0937 (0.0661)	0.1494*** (0.0428)	0.0341 (0.0277)
45-54	-0.0044 (0.0592)	-0.1222* (0.0669)	0.1920*** (0.0412)	0.0674** (0.0281)
55-64	-0.0119 (0.0594)	-0.1363** (0.0611)	0.2142*** (0.0371)	0.1072*** (0.0283)
65-74	0.0550 (0.0700)	-0.1343* (0.0738)	0.3576*** (0.0545)	0.1844*** (0.0424)
75+	-0.0659 (0.0781)	-0.2162** (0.0839)	0.3563*** (0.0678)	0.2603*** (0.0614)
Education (vocational)				
compulsory	0.0421 (0.0646)	0.0003 (0.0603)	-0.0261 (0.0572)	0.0277 (0.0497)
high school	0.0338 (0.0391)	-0.0070 (0.0369)	0.0265 (0.0287)	-0.0108 (0.0227)
2nd vocational	0.0523 (0.0550)	0.0797 (0.0554)	0.0342 (0.0515)	-0.0022 (0.0414)
higher vocational	0.0530* (0.0308)	0.0504 (0.0334)	0.0767*** (0.0261)	0.0553** (0.0224)
university	0.1046***	0.0728***	0.0689***	0.0638***

	(0.0275)	(0.0275)	(0.0242)	(0.0197)
Income (3000-5000 CHF)				
-3000 CHF	0.0352 (0.0596)	0.0392 (0.0546)	0.0217 (0.0456)	-0.0423 (0.0340)
5000-7000 CHF	-0.0262 (0.0398)	0.0214 (0.0380)	-0.0505 (0.0310)	-0.0265 (0.0250)
7000-9000 CHF	0.0230 (0.0426)	0.0394 (0.0409)	0.0162 (0.0356)	0.0217 (0.0287)
9000-11000 CHF	0.0843* (0.0446)	0.0649 (0.0422)	0.0446 (0.0364)	0.0534* (0.0319)
11000-13000 CHF	0.0162 (0.0471)	0.0797 (0.0520)	0.0178 (0.0474)	-0.0090 (0.0296)
13000-15000 CHF	0.0053 (0.0642)	0.0336 (0.0557)	0.0485 (0.0496)	0.0235 (0.0404)
15000+ CHF	0.0135 (0.0585)	0.0310 (0.0511)	0.0213 (0.0433)	0.0323 (0.0300)
Employment (employed)				
self-employed	0.0918** (0.0424)	0.0059 (0.0457)	0.1242*** (0.0413)	0.0336 (0.0273)
training/studying	-0.0309 (0.0592)	-0.0082 (0.0606)	-0.0425 (0.0398)	-0.0168 (0.0266)
homemaker	0.0193 (0.0703)	-0.0374 (0.0733)	-0.0262 (0.0584)	-0.0065 (0.0501)
retired	-0.0054 (0.0475)	-0.0216 (0.0485)	-0.0086 (0.0440)	0.0311 (0.0349)
unemployed	-0.0558 (0.0463)	-0.0388 (0.0498)	-0.0246 (0.0468)	0.0488 (0.0376)
Living situation (tenant)				
homeowner	0.0450* (0.0255)	0.0087 (0.0263)	0.0668*** (0.0237)	0.0646*** (0.0169)
Associational membership	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1586	0.1172	0.1760	0.1711
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets next to the categorical variables. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, **.01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

4.2 Membership in associations and organizations

A substantial body of research argues that voluntary participation in clubs and organizations enhances civic engagement within a democracy (see, e.g., [Almond and Verba 1963](#); [Verba and Nie 1972](#); [Verba et al. 1995](#); [Putnam et al. 1993](#), [Putnam 2000](#); [Wollebæk and Strømsnes 2008](#); [Alexander et al. 2012](#); [Aggeborn et al. 2021](#)). This engagement is often defined as “the ways in which citizens participate

in the life of a community to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler and Goggin 2005, p. 236). It can occur through increased personal interactions and networking, which foster general interpersonal trust, and through learning and practicing democratic principles within these organizations, often referred to as "*schools of democracy*" (e.g., Morales and Geurts 2007). Being a member in a club may also increase awareness of the importance of democratically elected representatives for a functioning community. In this way, the club environment may foster the internal motivation to engage in society through holding political office. And, board members in associations may be asked with a greater likelihood to take on a political office, as their involvement in a club could be interpreted as a signal of their willingness for civic engagement.

Figure B.7 in Appendix B presents the corresponding estimates for whether being a member of an association *in general* is associated with higher levels of (latent) political engagement compared to individuals without club membership. On average, members of associations are 23 percentage points more likely than non-members to have considered political office, and have a 15 percentage points higher likelihood of imagining themselves taking on a political mandate if asked. Similarly, the likelihood of having been asked to run for office (+ 21%-points) and having previously held political office (+ 13%-points) is significantly higher among club members.¹²

Table B.3 in Appendix B provides more detailed estimates from supplementary regressions where we break down associational membership into categories based on the purpose of the association. If respondents are active in several associations of different purposes (for example, in a football club and in a political party), we consider these memberships separately. Simultaneously, we include a binary variable "member in 2 assoc." that has the value 1 if the respondent is active in two associations of different purposes and 0 otherwise, and a variable "member in 3+ assoc." that takes the value 1 if the respondent is active in three or more associations and 0 otherwise. With these controls, the coefficients for the individual associational memberships can be interpreted as if no other memberships were held.¹³ Figure 1 presents the corresponding estimates. Compared to a respondent who is not in a club, an active member of a socially-oriented association is 12 percentage points more likely to have seriously or vaguely considered taking on political office and 9 percentage points more likely to consider or rather consider taking on office if asked. On a slightly smaller scale, people in sports clubs also have more likely considered political office than people without club membership. Not surprisingly, people who are members of a political party or group are by far the most likely to consider taking on a political office and are also significantly more likely than any other group to have previously held one.

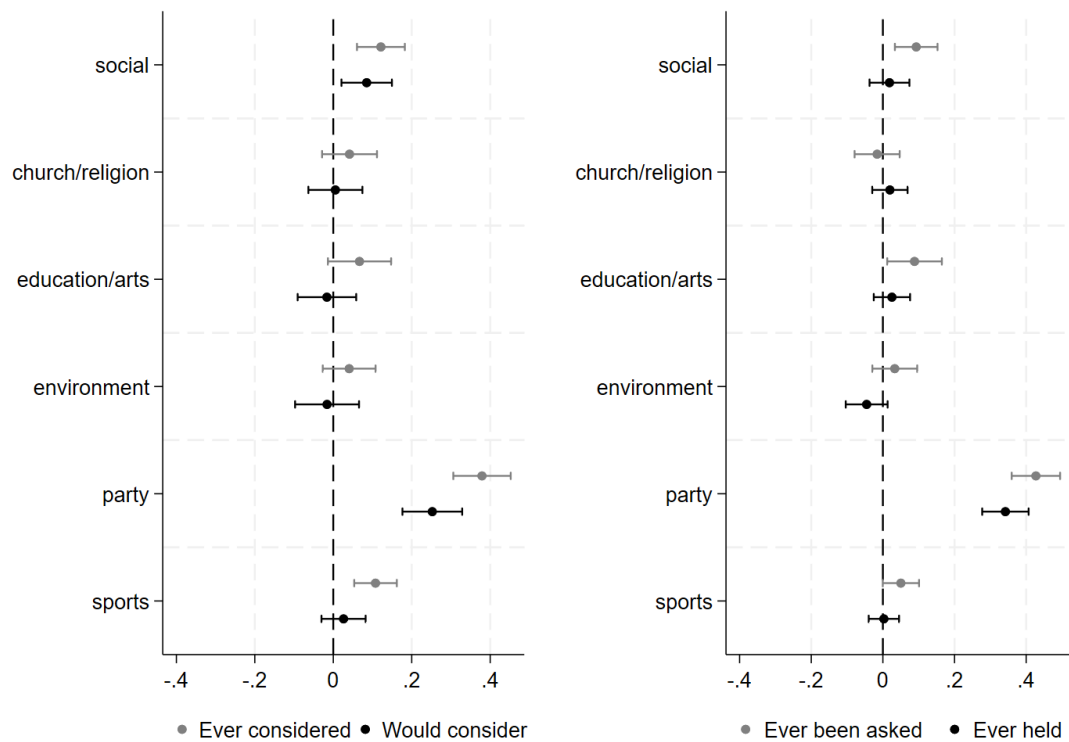
Our estimates indicate that active members of associations, particularly socially-oriented associations, sports clubs, and political parties, are more likely to state a willingness to take on political

¹²Respective p-values of all four coefficients are very close to zero.

¹³When approximating the difference between no and two associational memberships, the respective coefficients are summed up with the coefficient for "member in 2 assoc."

office compared to those not involved in such organizations. This should not be interpreted as a causal effect of associational membership on latent political engagement, though, as individuals with particular interests and motivations self-select into associations (e.g., [Aggeborn et al. 2021](#)). Without a natural experiment, it is challenging to determine whether those with a latent willingness to engage in politics are self-selecting into these associations – likely the case with political parties – or if the club environment itself fosters the willingness to engage in society through a political mandate. Nonetheless, these findings contribute to our limited understanding of the activities and roles of individuals who have given political engagement at least a serious thought ([Gulzar 2021](#)) and have potential implications for effective political recruitment, for example, where individuals willing to get involved might be found.

Figure 1: Marginal effects of associational membership by category on (latent) political engagement



Notes: The graph shows the estimated marginal effects of membership in associations by category on the 4 variables of (latent) political engagement. Table B.3 in Appendix B provides the corresponding estimates. Horizontal lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

5 Local contextual covariates of latent political engagement

5.1 Municipal characteristics and organization

The context in which individuals live shapes many of people's considerations and may thus also influence their latent political engagement. Since the seminal work "*Size and Democracy*" by [Dahl and Tufte \(1973\)](#), a substantial body of research has explored the relationship between jurisdiction size and civic engagement as well as political participation. It is hypothesized that social capital – defined by [Putnam \(2000\)](#) as "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19) – is higher in smaller jurisdictions, where people are more likely to know one another. Smaller communities thus foster social bonds among residents, contributing to what [Dahl and Tufte \(1973\)](#) describe as a "loyalty to a single integrated community" (p. 14). In such environments, where a strong sense of connectedness and belonging prevails, citizens may be more inclined to serve their community by taking on a local political mandate. Additionally, the social pressure to get involved, or the resulting costs if not doing so, are likely more pronounced in smaller communities, reducing the incentive to free-ride on the political engagement of others (see, e.g., [Ostrom 2000](#)). However, some scholars argue that larger cities offer other conditions that also foster social capital. The greater diversity and availability of associational organizations in urban areas are argued to enhance membership and participation, strengthening local bonds and community identity as much as in smaller jurisdictions (see [Denters et al. 2014](#), pp. 77-79 for an overview of these arguments). In addition, the higher diversity and preference heterogeneity in larger jurisdictions is a possible incentive for voters to participate and make sure that their interests are represented (demand side) ([Alesina and Spolaore 2003](#)) and, thus, creates new political niches for candidates and parties on the supply side ([Gerring et al. 2015](#)).

Another mechanism that could explain a link between municipality size and (latent) political engagement are the substantial differences in the number and nature of political offices that citizens are exposed to in small and large municipalities. As there is a minimum number of mandates to be filled also in small municipalities, the per-capita demand is higher, and therefore, people are more likely to be asked to consider taking on one of them. Population size also matters because mandates in municipal councils, local parliaments, and commissions become more complex and demanding in larger municipalities ([Geser et al. 2011](#); [Freitag et al. 2019](#); [Steiner et al. 2021](#)). Accordingly, in smaller municipalities, relatively more people may feel confident in taking on such mandates, i.e., they have a sufficient internal political efficacy to serve in a political office ([McDonnell 2020](#)). However, political offices in larger municipalities typically offer better remuneration and are associated with greater prestige and power ([Geser et al. 2011](#); [Steiner et al. 2021](#)), making them more attractive.

We examine two additional variables that could influence latent political engagement within a municipality: the proportion of residents who have lived in the municipality for more than ten years and the proportion of residents who commute to work outside the municipality. A higher percentage of

long-term residents and a lower percentage of commuters likely mean that citizens are more familiar with each other, which is expected to have a positive impact on the latent willingness for political engagement.

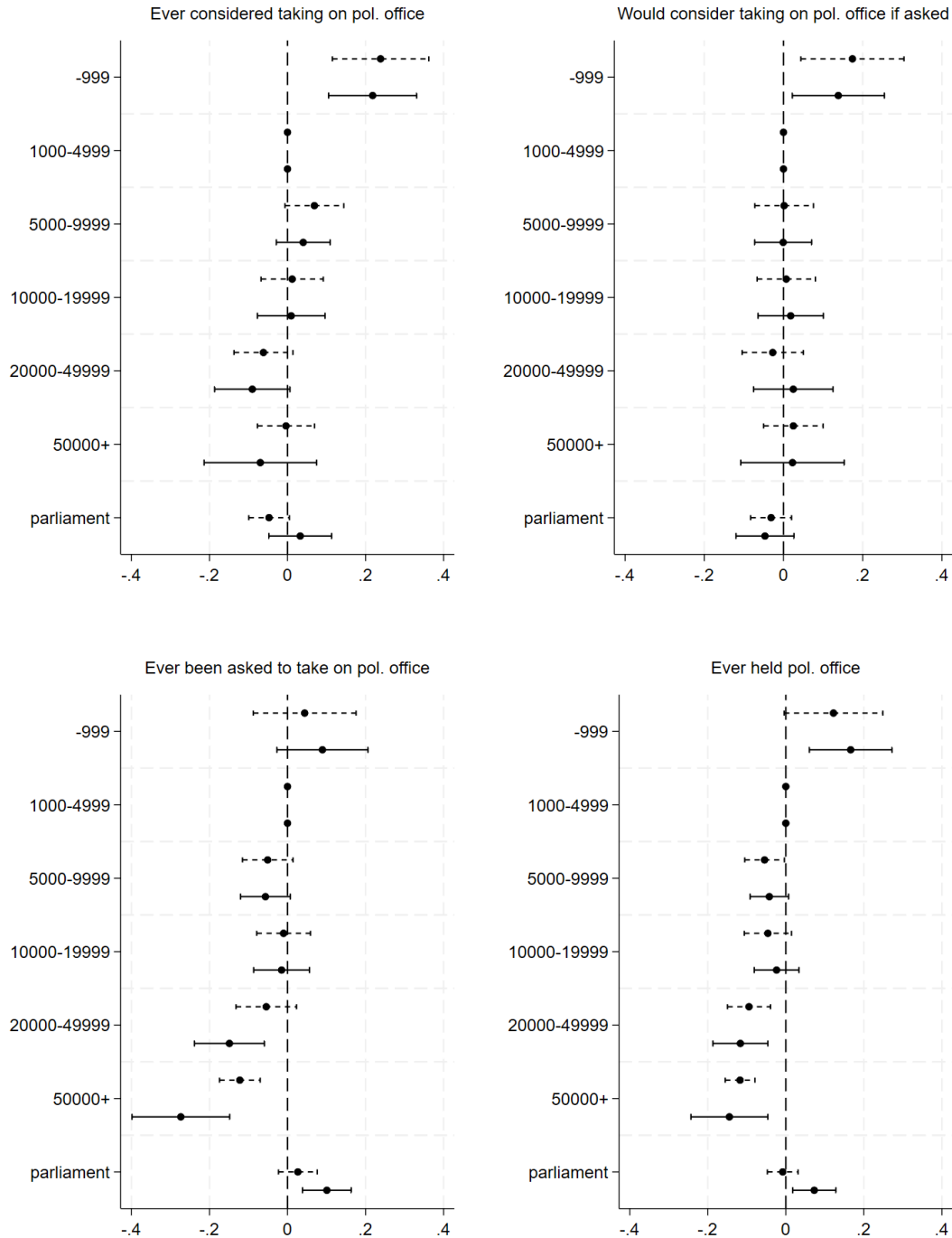
Finally, we also consider whether the local legislative is organized through a municipal assembly or a municipal parliament. In assembly municipalities, the number of political offices is limited to positions in the municipal executive and in commissions. However, citizens have the opportunity to directly raise and vote on political issues at the municipal assembly. According to Freitag (2006), local assemblies – particularly in smaller municipalities – can foster community networks and increase political interest, as deliberation and decision-making occur closer to citizens. This proximity may enhance latent political engagement. Conversely, parliamentary municipalities offer more political offices relative to their size, of which the parliamentary mandates require significantly less effort in terms of time than executive positions, making them more accessible to the average working person (Freitag et al. 2019). Therefore, it is ex ante unclear which organization of the local legislative is more conducive to fostering a willingness to take on political mandates.

Latent political engagement by municipal characteristics

Figure 2 presents the estimates of how municipal characteristics are related to (latent) political engagement (see Table C.1.1 in Appendix C.1 for the regression output). The raw difference (dashed) as well as the estimated marginal effects (solid) from Equation (1) are shown. Individuals from very small municipalities, with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, are significantly more likely to have considered holding political office and would be more likely to do so if asked, compared to all other size groups. However, there is no evidence of a continuously lower fraction of people who have ever considered political engagement as municipality size increases. This is different for requests for and actual political engagement. As municipality size grows, the likelihood of having been asked to take on a political office and of having actually held office decreases sharply, which one would expect given that smaller municipalities have a higher ratio of local political offices to population (see, e.g., Geser et al. 2011). While this finding arises almost mechanically, it supports the validity of at least one of our measures.

Regarding the organization of the local legislative, no statistically significant difference is observed between people who live in a municipality with a parliament rather than a municipal assembly in terms of whether they have ever considered political office or would do so if asked. This finding challenges the notion that municipal parliaments may provide low-threshold political offices, where individuals can get involved with politics at low costs and are therefore more inclined to consider a political mandate. However, we observe a clear demand-side effect of municipal parliaments. In municipalities with a parliament, the likelihood of having been asked to run for office or having already held political office is 10 and 7 percentage points higher, respectively, compared to assembly municipalities. This difference is not apparent in a simple comparison between parliamentary and assembly municipalities,

Figure 2: Marginal effects of municipality size and local legislative on (latent) political engagement



Notes: The graph shows the raw difference (dashed) and the estimated marginal effects (solid) from Model (1) by municipality size and local legislative. Table C.1.1 in Appendix C.1 provides the corresponding estimates. Horizontal lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

i.e., when not accounting for differences in municipality size. Municipalities with a parliament are, on average, larger than those with an assembly, which makes it necessary to compare within the same size groups.¹⁴

The higher demand for individuals willing to engage in political offices in municipalities with parliaments likely stems from the higher number of available political offices compared to those with assemblies. Figure C.1.1 in Appendix C.1 provides corresponding evidence based on information from municipal clerks collected by [Ladner et al. \(2021\)](#). While the difference in the number of offices varies by population size – likely due to the varying sizes of parliaments (see, e.g., [Ladner 2016](#)) – the overall average difference across all groups is approximately 18 offices.

Regarding the share of people who spent more than ten years in the municipality, we do not observe a systematic statistical relationship with whether they have ever considered or would consider taking on a political office if asked. For people living in municipalities with a high share of commuters also no systematic link to latent political engagement is measured. However, people in these municipalities have, on average, less likely ever been asked to take on a political mandate. These latter results are reported in Table C.1.1 in Appendix C.1.

5.2 Municipal mergers

Municipal mergers, i.e., the amalgamation of two or more existing municipalities, are the most sweeping change to politico-administrative structures at the local level that citizens can experience. We explore the impact of this specific change to the local context on residents' latent political engagement next to more stable municipal characteristics. A growing body of literature has studied the impact of municipal mergers on citizens' local participation, exploiting the quasi-experimental features of these reforms. Besides the change in jurisdiction size affecting the voting calculus in local elections (see, e.g., [Allers et al. 2021](#)), identification with the newly formed municipality might be an important channel through which jurisdictional mergers impact political participation (see, e.g., [Frey et al. 2023](#)). Empirically, there is rather clear evidence that municipal mergers have a negative effect on turnout in local elections (see, e.g., [Allers et al. 2021](#); [Tavares 2018](#)) – particularly so in pre-merger jurisdictions that account only for a minor share of the new municipality's population and thus experience a more intense “merger shock” ([Koch and Rochat 2017](#); [Rodrigues and Tavares 2020](#)). However, studies from Denmark and Finland also show evidence for a mobilizing or rallying effect of municipal mergers. In elections to municipal councils, voters from smaller parts of a new municipality prefer candidates from their pre-merger jurisdiction, whereas voters from larger parts of a new municipality do not vote based on a territorial principle ([Jakobsen and Kjaer 2016](#); [Saarimaa and Tukiainen 2016](#)). Voters from

¹⁴We check whether we have common support in our sample, meaning that there is variation in the organization of the local legislative within the same size group and canton (see Figure C.1.2 in Appendix C.1). The organization of the local legislative with a parliament becomes more likely as population size increases. However, we do have sufficient common support across several cantons to compare municipalities with and without parliaments within the same population categories.

pre-merger jurisdictions that experience a more intense “merger shock”, thus, are more concerned with being represented in local political institutions than voters that reside in the “dominant” part of the new municipality.

Additionally, municipal mergers change the nature of political mandates (in line with arguments from Section 5.1), i.e., they can become more complex and demanding, but also more attractive due to better remuneration and higher prestige and power. In sum, there are a multitude of aspects related to mergers that let us expect an impact on latent political engagement.

To assess their net effect, we combine our survey data with a dataset of all Swiss municipal merger projects that have been voted on since the year 1999 (Strebel 2025). Swiss municipal merger projects are generally implemented bottom-up, i.e., municipalities initiate and decide on merger processes themselves.¹⁵ Cantons’ role is limited to the provision of administrative support and financial incentives. In order to be implemented, a Swiss municipal merger project needs to be accepted by a majority of voters – either at the ballot box or in a municipal assembly (el-Wakil and Strebel 2022) – in each involved municipality. A quarter of all 484 merger projects that have been voted on until the end of 2024 did not pass this threshold and hence failed.

We account for this feature of Swiss municipal merger processes in our analysis by dividing respondents into four different groups with respect to the merger history of their municipality (see Table 2): those that live in municipalities that have never voted on a merger project (no vote), those that live in municipalities involved in a failed merger project (fail), those that live in municipalities where a merger vote was successful by the time of the survey (success) and those that live in a municipality where a merger vote took place after the survey was fielded (vote post). Note that a very small subset of respondents (i.e., 19) live in municipalities that approved a merger vote before the survey was conducted but where the formal implementation occurred in 2024, so after the survey year in 2023. These observations are grouped with the “success” category, as the organizational and institutional changes associated with the merger transition (for example, the disruption of local party organizations) likely begin prior to the formal implementation date. Still, the vast majority of individuals in the “success” group are respondents from municipalities where the merger had been fully implemented by the time of the survey (i.e., 1,635). Overall, this categorization into four groups allows us to compare respondents that live in a merged municipality with respondents that live in municipalities that did (i.e., fail) or did not (i.e., no vote) attempt to merge.

Since we have information on the zip code level for respondents, we can further differentiate individuals within the merged municipalities. We do so based on two criteria: whether or not the resident

¹⁵Three cantons have implemented municipal reorganizations top down in the last three decades. In addition to the exceptional case of Glarus, where the *cantonal* citizens’ assembly, i.e., the *Landsgemeinde*, decided in 2006 to merge the 25 municipalities into three new ones, the cantons of Ticino and Valais have implemented municipal mergers against the will of the voters of at least one involved pre-merger municipality in six and in one case, respectively. Formally, the popular votes on municipal mergers in the canton of Ticino are only of consultative nature and not binding for the cantonal parliament which takes the ultimate decision regarding the mergers. Nevertheless, in the vast majority of the 1,079 municipalities that merged between the early 2000s and 2024, more than 50% of the local population approved the merger rather than having it imposed.

Table 2: Number of observations by merger history

Merger history	Definition	Obs.	Municipalities (as of 2023)	Municipalities (pre-merger)
Reference groups				
no vote	never voted on a merger project	6,158	1,055	1,055
fail	merger project failed	635	169	169
vote post	vote on merger > 03 April 2023	474	27	27
Treatment groups				
success	merger project successful	1,654	212	386
Name				
new	new name after merger	483	114	223
keep	keeps name after merger	1,171	151	163
Intensity				
low	$\frac{pop_i}{\sum_{j=1}^n pop_j} > 0.5$	1,196	152	184
high	$\frac{pop_i}{\sum_{j=1}^n pop_j} \leq 0.5$	458	111	202
Time				
10+ years	merger vote < 2013	837	124	225
5-10 years	2013 ≤ merger vote ≤ 2017	472	53	108
-5 years	merger vote > 2017	345	36	53

Notes: This table shows the categorization of our study sample based on the merger history of each respondent’s place of residence. If an individual lives in a village/city that was formerly an independent political municipality, they are assigned to the “keep” group if the name of the pre-merger municipality has remained the same or partially the same, and to the “new” group if the name of the pre-merger municipality to which the locality belongs has changed as a result of the merger. Respondents are classified into the “high intensity” group if, at the time of the merger vote, the pre-merger municipality to which their locality belonged made up less than 50% of the population of the resulting post-merger municipality. Additionally, individuals are grouped based on the time since the merger vote occurred: less than 5 years, between 5 and 10 years, or more than 10 years. For those residing in municipalities that have undergone multiple merger votes since 1999 (N = 481), we assign the most recent merger project.

Data sources: See [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

pre-merger municipality keeps its name or adopts a new one and whether the resident pre-merger municipality makes up more or less than 50% of the merger coalition’s population and hence experiences a merger with low or high intensity. While the two measures overlap to a significant degree,¹⁶ the first indicates whether or not an important identification criterion for residents, their municipality’s name, changes, whereas the second one indicates whether or not residents find themselves in a minority or

¹⁶Among the 202 pre-merger municipalities in our sample classified as high intensity, 87% received a new name as a result of the merger. In contrast, only 26% of pre-merger municipalities in the low-intensity group experienced a name change.

a majority in the new municipality. Finally, we also distinguish successful mergers according to the time since they have been voted on. In municipalities that have voted and merged a longer time ago, residents are probably more used to the new municipality and have “digested” any merger shock.

There are several caveats regarding this analysis. Due to the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot causally identify the effects of mergers on latent political engagement. Moreover, we cannot be certain that respondents lived in a municipality at the time of the merger as we do not have information on their residence duration in a municipality. Nevertheless, this analysis will give us some indication of how changes to local municipal structures covary with latent political engagement. Importantly, we can also compare differences between answers to the general question about considering a political office and the more specific one “if asked” that is implicitly referring to the concrete municipal structure. For instance, one could expect that whether someone has ever considered running for political office could be less influenced by a municipal merger than their response to the more specific question about taking on a political office if confronted with the opportunity.

Latent political engagement by merger history

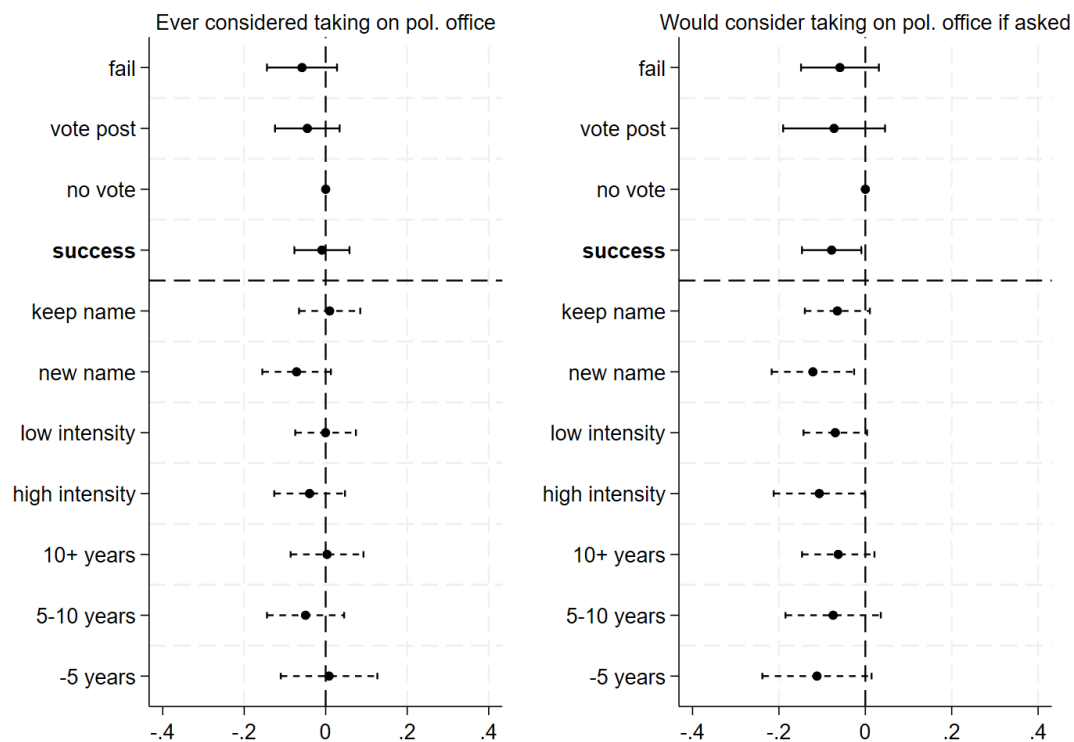
Figure 3 shows what individuals report as latent political engagement as a function of residing in municipalities that were differently exposed to municipal merger processes.¹⁷ For the dependent variable having ever considered political office, we do not find statistically significant differences depending on the (kind of) exposure a respondent had to a merger process. However, respondents in merged municipalities are significantly less likely to consider taking on political office if asked than respondents in municipalities that were never exposed to a merger process (-8 %-points, p-value = 0.026). For this dependent variable, we can further observe a tendency for respondents living in pre-merger municipalities that lost their name as a result of a merger, that experienced a more intense merger, or that merged more recently to be particularly reluctant to take on political office. However, the differences between these sub-samples of merged municipalities are not statistically significant.¹⁸

More generally, Figure 3 shows that respondents living in municipalities that attempt(ed) to merge (i.e., fail and vote post) exhibit similar tendencies to those living in merged municipalities regarding whether they would take on political office or not, even if the coefficients are not statistically significantly different from zero. This suggests that it might not be the merger itself that decreases the latent willingness for political engagement, but rather that little political engagement or recruitment problems in a municipality might be a driver for a municipality to engage in a merger process. To further investigate this possibility, we conduct a complementary analysis in Appendix C.3 to assess whether there is a potential selection effect of municipalities with comparatively lower levels of political engagement into mergers.

¹⁷The control strategy is the same as before, except that we do not control for the local legislative, as merged municipalities might introduce a municipal parliament as part of the merger transition.

¹⁸The estimated marginal effects of municipal mergers on the dependent variables ever been asked to take on political office and ever held political office are shown in Figure C.2.1 in Appendix C.2.

Figure 3: Differences in latent political engagement across municipalities grouped by merger history



Notes: Tables C.2.1 and C.2.2 in Appendix C.2 provide the corresponding estimates. Horizontal lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

Overall, the complementary analysis in Appendix C.3 reveals that municipalities with difficulties in recruiting candidates for local political office were more likely to be part of a merger project (see Table C.3.1). This finding is consistent with the assessment of experts that recruitment difficulties are a driver of municipal mergers (see, e.g., [Swianiewicz et al. 2022](#), p. 100). For our analysis of the link between municipal mergers and latent political engagement, this suggests that respondents living in “no vote” municipalities are likely not an appropriate comparison group for individuals living in successfully merged municipalities. Therefore, the comparison between successful and failed mergers is more suitable, as both groups initially selected into merger projects but only the “success” group has undergone the merger transition. When making this comparison, assuming that the ex ante level of latent political engagement was the same, we find no statistically significant differences in either the likelihood of having ever considered taking on political office ($p\text{-value} = 0.33$) or the likelihood of considering it if asked ($p\text{-value} = 0.71$). Furthermore, we observe no statistically significant differences across any of the merger success subgroups. Even among those who presumably experienced the greatest merger shock – such as residents of small municipalities that adopted a new name – there is no statistically significant difference compared to municipalities that remained independent.

In addition to examining the average consequences of mergers on latent political engagement, we perform an effect heterogeneity analysis in Appendix C.4. The results reveal that homeowners are more likely than tenants to consider running for political office if asked when their pre-merger municipality makes up the minority share of the newly formed municipality (see Table C.4.2). This suggests a politico-economic rationale as these homeowners at the fringe have particular reason to engage in politics in order to maintain the value of their economic capital, for example, affected from zoning regulation.

6 Cantonal contextual covariates of latent political engagement

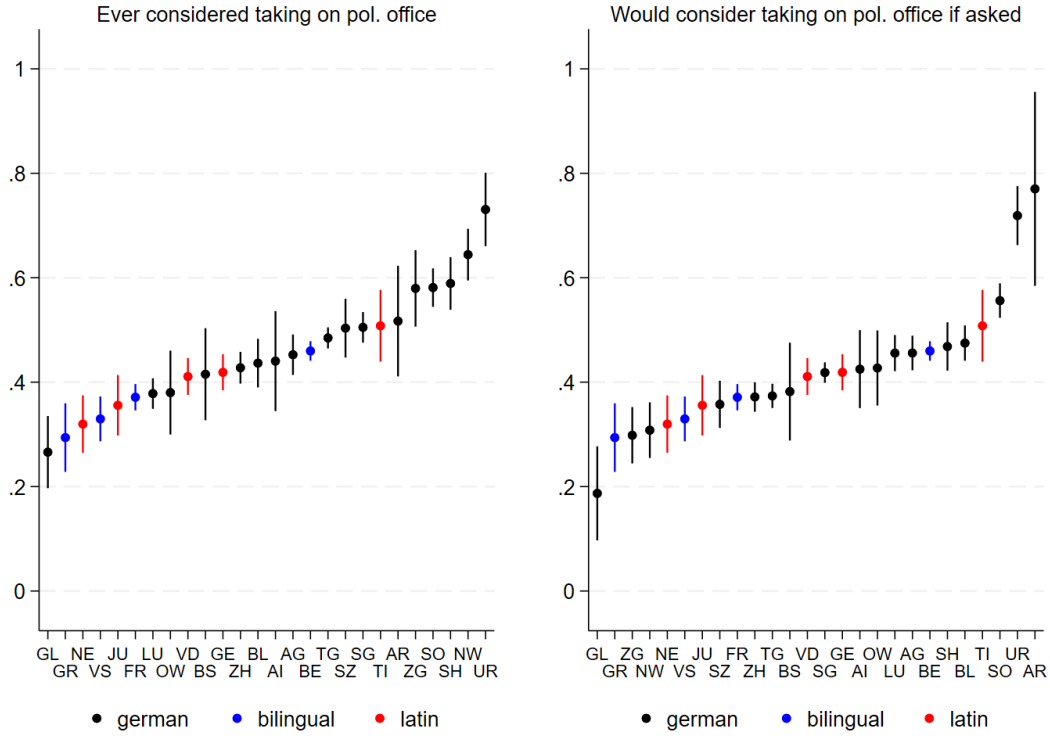
6.1 Cantonal differences

Formal and informal institutions – including culture and norms – beyond the local context are a further set of factors that might well shape people’s motivation to take over the responsibilities of a political mandate. In the Swiss democratic system, powerful subfederal units, i.e., the cantons, maintain different political cultures linked to differences in electoral systems, direct democratic participation rights, and the degree of decentralization of competencies to municipalities. To preclude an omitted variable bias from this cantonal context, we have so far controlled for cantonal differences in (latent) political engagement using canton fixed effects without discussing the estimated differences in detail. Figure 4 shows the variation in the estimated probability of having considered a political mandate and the willingness to take on a political office if asked based on respondents’ canton of residence – while holding all other covariates at the sample mean. The estimated differences have to be interpreted with caution, however, as some predictions are based on only few observations in cantons with low population (see Table B.1 in Appendix B). Still, substantial differences are suggested. At the extremes, the predicted probability of an individual from the canton of Uri having considered political office and being willing to accept one if asked is approximately 50 percentage points higher than for an individual from the canton of Glarus. As we control for key socio-economic and local contextual factors in the regressions, these cantonal differences cannot arise due to compositional differences in these characteristics. The cantonal disparities rather suggest other, as yet unexplored, determinants of latent political engagement.

6.2 Culture vs. formal institutions

One potential explanation for these regional disparities in latent political engagement is language-cultural differences. Many voting results in Switzerland reveal regional divisions along linguistic lines (see, e.g., [Swissinfo 2024](#)), and empirical studies provide evidence of political and economic preference differences as well as individual social capital (e.g., trust in others) across language-cultural regions (see, e.g., [Mueller and Dardanelli 2014](#); [Eugster et al. 2017](#); [Freitag 2021](#)). Moreover, conceptions of a well-functioning democracy might differ along linguistic borders (see, e.g., [Stadelmann-Steffen and](#)

Figure 4: Latent political engagement across cantons and language regions



Notes: The figure shows linear predictions of latent political engagement by canton, with all other covariates in Regression (1) held at their means. The colors represent different language regions. Standard errors are clustered at cantonal level. The vertical lines indicate 95% confidence intervals. See Table B.1 in Appendix B for the number of observations by canton of residence.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

Freitag 2011; Bühlmann et al. 2013). Specifically, Latin language areas are thought to adhere more strongly to the principles of representative democracy, whereas German-speaking cantons build on the direct-democratic participation of citizens. According to this reasoning, one could hypothesize that people in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland may be more willing to take on a political office due to a stronger consensus that political representation is both important and necessary for a democratic society. Conversely, in German-speaking Switzerland, where participatory democratic norms are more pronounced and political decisions are more often made collectively in assemblies, there may be a shared understanding that anyone can participate in politics and is capable of holding political office. Thereby, it is ex ante unclear which conception of democracy and political culture is more conducive to fostering a willingness to take on political mandates.

Besides political culture, variation in formal institutions may account for the observed differences in latent political engagement across cantons. Two prominent political institutions that vary across Swiss cantons are local autonomy and direct democracy. Increased decision-making powers at the municipal

level could make local offices more attractive, i.e., they come with meaningful work and are more prestigious. Current empirical evidence supports this perspective (e.g., [Revelli 2016](#)). On the other hand, greater local autonomy might also increase the complexity of political mandates, potentially reducing the pool of individuals with a sufficient internal political efficacy to serve in local office. As for direct democracy, regular voting on municipal or cantonal initiatives and referendums might shape political socialization, particularly by fostering political interest, which in turn is expected to increase the willingness to engage in politics (e.g., [Ladner and Fiechter 2012](#)).

Examining the average differences across cantons reveals no clear evidence to support the hypothesis that latent political engagement varies systematically along language-cultural lines (see Figure 4). For example, small German-speaking Swiss cantons such as Uri, Schaffhausen, Glarus, and Obwalden appear at both the upper and lower ends of the distribution. Similarly, in the Latin regions (i.e, French- or Italian-speaking), cantons like Ticino and Neuchâtel show contrasting levels of latent political engagement, with Ticino exhibiting above-average levels and Neuchâtel showing below-average levels. Regarding institutional variation, the differences in the predicted likelihood of having ever considered political office across cantons correlate positively with cantonal differences in municipal autonomy, but not with levels of direct democracy (see Figure D.1 in Appendix D). There is no observable bivariate association between formal institutions and the predicted likelihood of considering taking on political office if asked across cantons.

In addition to examining bivariate correlations, we conduct regressions at the individual level, including the three variables local autonomy, direct democracy at the cantonal level, and direct democracy at the local level, as well as the respondent's native language (see Specifications 1 and 3 in Table 3).¹⁹ In these specifications, canton fixed effects cannot be included. The results suggest a modest positive association between local autonomy and latent political engagement. However, this coefficient is only statistically significant at the 10% level when the dependent variable is the willingness to take on political office if asked. Neither of the two direct democracy variables is statistically significantly linked to latent political engagement.²⁰ Overall, the institutional conditions of local autonomy and direct democracy cannot account for the substantial regional differences in latent political engagement observed in Figure 4.

Examining the influence of culture that is reflected in language on latent political engagement, we find that being a German or Italian speaker is associated with a substantially higher probability of having ever considered political office compared to being a French speaker, by approximately 10 and 12 percentage points, respectively. For German- versus French-speaking people, we can study language-cultural differences in latent political engagement even within canton, as there is a sizable

¹⁹Due to the very small number of Romansh-speaking respondents (i.e., 24), we do not show or interpret the coefficient for this group.

²⁰In a robustness check, we exclude all cantons with a sample size of less than 50 respondents (see Table D.1 in Appendix D). The coefficients remain at a similar level, but lose statistical precision due to the exclusion of the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden (AI), Appenzell Ausserrhoden (AR), Glarus (GL), Nidwalden (NW), Obwalden (OW) and Uri (UR).

number of French speakers in the canton of Berne and German speakers in the cantons of Valais and Fribourg.²¹ German speakers relative to French speakers exhibit a robust 11 percentage points higher likelihood of having seriously or vaguely considered taking on a political mandate. When considering the willingness to accept an office if asked, German speakers exhibit still a 6 percentage points higher likelihood compared to French speakers. However, this coefficient is not statistically significant at conventional levels. As there is a very small number of Italian speakers outside the canton of Ticino,²² the coefficient for Italian-speaking in Specifications (2) and (4) is not considered reliable and therefore not interpreted.

Table 3: Culture vs. formal institutions and latent political engagement

Dep. variable	Ever considered		Would consider	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Language (french)				
german	0.1022** (0.0444)	0.1117* (0.0634)	0.0316 (0.0522)	0.0562 (0.0577)
italian	0.1177** (0.0526)	0.2475** (0.1039)	0.0294 (0.0551)	0.2942*** (0.0868)
Cantonal institutions				
local autonomy	0.0125 (0.0084)		0.0155* (0.0090)	
cantonal direct democracy	-0.0105 (0.0165)		-0.0184 (0.0221)	
local direct democracy	-0.0170 (0.0143)		-0.0077 (0.0172)	
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1472	0.1611	0.0994	0.1196
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. The coefficient for Romansh-speaking is not displayed due to the small number of observations. Standard errors are clustered at cantonal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Ladner et al. \(2023\)](#) for the measure of local autonomy, [Vatter et al. \(2024\)](#) for the measure of cantonal direct democracy and [Witzig and Vatter \(2023\)](#) for the measure of local direct democracy.

²¹In our sample, there are 243 French speakers compared to 859 German speakers in the canton of Berne, 77 German speakers compared to 507 French speakers in the canton of Fribourg, and 45 German speakers compared to 465 French speakers in the canton of Valais.

²²In our sample, 45 respondents speak Italian as their main language while living outside the canton of Ticino, compared to 286 Italian-speaking respondents residing within Ticino.

7 Concluding remarks

Given the concerns about political and democratic alienation in Western countries, there is a need to understand individuals' willingness to hold political office. This research paper introduces the concept of latent political engagement – an underlying motivation to take on a political mandate which is, unlike an actual candidacy, to some extent independent of specific political opportunities. Using four survey measures that capture both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, we provide the first systematic assessment of latent political engagement in Switzerland, a country with a particularly high demand for political personnel due to its many municipal and cantonal offices.

Our findings indicate a relatively high level of latent political engagement in Switzerland: 44% of respondents have ever vaguely or seriously considered holding political office, while 42% could clearly or rather imagine doing so if asked. To be sure, these absolute levels are difficult to assess as we do not know how serious people did or would (if asked) consider taking on a political mandate and to what extent the responses reflect social desirability. However, at least the idea of such involvement is generally supported by a substantive proportion of citizens. Moreover, we can focus on and learn from differences across socio-economic groups and people exposed to different contextual conditions. Demographically, men and younger individuals exhibit higher levels of latent political engagement. Higher education and self-employment are also associated with a greater likelihood of having seriously considered political office, while income shows no clear correlation. The fact that well-educated and high-earning individuals are rather more than less willing to take on a political mandate is contrary to a narrow opportunity-cost rationale. Additionally, latent political engagement is higher among those heavily invested in their municipality – whether through home ownership (economic capital) or associational membership (social capital).

Among contextual factors, we find no evidence that people living in merged municipalities have a lower level of latent political engagement compared to respondents from municipalities that attempted but failed to merge. Given that we account for the current municipality size (and thus exploit variation of the merger history within the same size group), our estimates indicate the consequences of mergers beyond the impact of living in a larger municipality post-merger. Such a “size effect” on willingness to take on political office might well exist as we observe differing levels of latent political engagement across municipalities of varying sizes. It is small jurisdictions in particular that are conducive to fostering a willingness to take on political mandates. This raises possible concerns about Swiss cantons' strategies to incentivize municipal mergers, incentives which are particularly taken up by municipalities that have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.

Furthermore, we find evidence of language-cultural influences on latent political engagement. Native German speakers are more likely than French speakers to have seriously considered political office, even within the same canton, suggesting that participatory democratic norms are stronger

among German-speaking Swiss citizens. In contrast, we find no clear evidence that the variation in formal institutions measured at the cantonal level such as in local autonomy or in direct democracy systematically correlates with latent political engagement.

After this first shot, the measuring instruments should ideally be refined in order to be able to shed light on the phenomenon of latent political engagement from a more comprehensive perspective in follow-up research. First, this refers to the time frame within which people have considered an engagement. So far, “having ever considered political office” captures an absorbing state and it is difficult to assess whether a possible engagement was an issue recently. Second, how seriously somebody considered an engagement could be put in perspective when related to discussions with others about a possible candidacy or with an item asking for the concrete mandate they considered or would potentially run for. Moreover, among respondents who report to have been asked to take on political office, demand-side factors could be assessed by asking respondents about the role of political parties and local authorities in the experienced recruitment attempt. Finally, people who report that they have ever held an office could be concretely asked about their most prestigious mandate.

Future research, ideally can rely on a broader data base both for other countries and for the country at hand, i.e., Switzerland. A comparative analysis of latent political engagement across countries could consider a more pronounced variation in institutions regarding aspects of federalism as well as participatory democracy. In the Swiss institutional context, larger samples from more cantons and single municipalities would allow to study variation in micro institutions beyond the macro indicators of local autonomy and direct democracy. Such a setup would also allow exploring the potentially crucial role of experience, i.e., experience with political processes as well as outcomes. This could clarify the role of formal political institutions versus rules in use in shaping citizens’ willingness to engage in political mandates. Regarding municipal amalgamation, sampling respondents from both pre-merger and resulting post-merger municipalities over multiple survey waves would enable researchers to examine, both separately and dynamically, how changes in jurisdiction size, along with potential shifts in identification and connectedness, impact latent political engagement. This would provide a natural extension to our cross-sectional findings.

Finally, and closely related to the previous points, incorporating survey items proxying for additional dimensions of citizens’ investment in their municipality and canton of residence seems a promising avenue. Items on local residence duration, commuting behavior, or being a parent to school-aged children could capture citizens’ emotional and practical investment in, and attachment to, their municipality or state and, thus, shape their latent political engagement. By addressing these dimensions, future research can deepen our understanding of latent political engagement, ultimately shedding light on the institutional and social conditions that foster democratic participation and political representation.

References

- Adler, R. P. and J. Goggin (2005). What do we mean by “civic engagement”? *Journal of Transformative Education* 3(3), 236–253.
- Aggeborn, L., N. Lajevardi, and P. Nyman (2021). Disentangling the impact of civil association membership on political participation: Evidence from Swedish panel data. *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4), 1773–1781.
- Alesina, A. and E. Spolaore (2003). *The Size of Nations*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Alexander, D. T., J. Barraket, J. M. Lewis, and M. Considine (2012). Civic engagement and associationalism: The impact of group membership scope versus intensity of participation. *European Sociological Review* 28(1), 43–58.
- Allers, M., J. de Natris, H. Rienks, and T. de Greef (2021). Is small beautiful? Transitional and structural effects of municipal amalgamation on voter turnout in local and national elections. *Electoral Studies* 70, 102284.
- Almond, G. A. and S. Verba (1963). *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Andreoni, J. and J. M. Rao (2011). The power of asking: How communication affects selfishness, empathy, and altruism. *Journal of Public Economics* 95(7-8), 513–520.
- Andreoni, J., J. M. Rao, and H. Trachtman (2017). Avoiding the ask: A field experiment on altruism, empathy, and charitable giving. *Journal of Political Economy* 125(3), 625–653.
- Berg, H. (2020). On the returns to holding political office (is it worth it?). *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 178, 840–865.
- Besley, T. (2005). Political selection. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19(3), 43–60.
- Bieri, U., A. Doriot, T. Burgunder, J. Kocher, A. Pepe, M. Bürgi, R. Bartlome, R. Rey, and M. Tschanz (2023a). Dataset: Bevölkerungsbefragung “Wie geht’s, Schweiz?”, 1. Befragungswelle. gfs.bern: Bern.
- Bieri, U., A. Doriot, T. Burgunder, J. Kocher, A. Pepe, M. Bürgi, R. Bartlome, R. Rey, and M. Tschanz (2023b). Schlussbericht – “Wie geht’s, Schweiz?” / 1. Welle. gfs.bern: Bern.
- Black, G. S. (1972). A theory of political ambition: Career choices and the role of structural incentives. *American Political Science Review* 66(1), 144–159.
- Braendle, T. and A. Stutzer (2019). Voters and representatives: How should representatives be selected? In: Congleton, R., Grofman, B., Voigt, S. (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Public Choice*, Vol. 2 (pp. 24–43). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Broockman, D. E. (2013). Black politicians are more intrinsically motivated to advance blacks' interests: A field experiment manipulating political incentives. *American Journal of Political Science* 57(3), 521–536.
- Bühlmann, M., A. Vatter, O. Dlabac, and H.-P. Schaub (2013). Liberale Romandie, radikale Deutschschweiz? Kantonale Demokratien zwischen Repräsentation und Partizipation. *Swiss Political Science Review* 19(2), 157–188.
- Coffé, H., R. Devroe, A. Vandeleene, and B. Wauters (2022). Preferences for and perceptions about politicians' goals and how they impact women's and men's political ambition. *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 5(2), 191–210.
- Crowder-Meyer, M. (2020). Baker, bus driver, babysitter, candidate? Revealing the gendered development of political ambition among ordinary Americans. *Political Behavior* 42(2), 359–384.
- Dahl, M. and J. Nystrup (2021). Confident and cautious candidates: Explaining under-representation of women in Danish municipal politics. *European Journal of Political Research* 60(1), 199–224.
- Dahl, R. A. and E. R. Tufte (1973). *Size and Democracy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dal Bó, E., F. Finan, and M. A. Rossi (2013). Strengthening state capabilities: The role of financial incentives in the call to public service. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128(3), 1169–1218.
- Denters, B., M. Goldsmith, A. Ladner, P. E. Mouritzen, and L. E. Rose (2014). *Size and Local Democracy*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Cheltenham.
- Devroe, R., H. Coffé, A. Vandeleene, and B. Wauters (2023). Gender gaps in political ambition on different levels of policy-making. *Parliamentary Affairs* 76(4), 924–946.
- Dietz, J. (2024). Ehrenamtliche Politiker: Warum machen Sie in Ihrer Freizeit Kommunalpolitik? *Zeit Online*, April 30, 2024, available at <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2024-01/ehrenamt-kommunalpolitik-engagement>.
- el-Wakil, A. and M. A. Strebel (2022). Participatory processes and their outcomes: Comparing assembly and popular vote decisions. *European Political Science Review* 14(3), 441–458.
- Eugster, B., R. Lalive, A. Steinhauer, and J. Zweimüller (2017). Culture, work attitudes, and job search: Evidence from the Swiss language border. *Journal of the European Economic Association* 15(5), 1056–1100.
- Fischel, W. A. (2001a). *The Homevoter Hypothesis: How Home Values Influence Local Government Taxation, School Finance, and Land-Use Policies*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Fischel, W. A. (2001b). Homevoters, municipal corporate governance, and the benefit view of the property tax. *National Tax Journal* 54(1), 157–173.

- Fox, R. L. and J. L. Lawless (2004). Entering the arena? Gender and the decision to run for office. *American Journal of Political Science* 48(2), 264–280.
- Fox, R. L. and J. L. Lawless (2005). To run or not to run for office: Explaining nascent political ambition. *American Journal of Political Science* 49(3), 642–659.
- Fox, R. L. and J. L. Lawless (2010). If only they'd ask: Gender, recruitment, and political ambition. *Journal of Politics* 72(2), 310–326.
- Fox, R. L. and J. L. Lawless (2014). Uncovering the origins of the gender gap in political ambition. *American Political Science Review* 108(3), 499–519.
- Freeman, R. B. (1997). Working for nothing: The supply of volunteer labor. *Journal of Labor Economics* 15(1), 140–166.
- Freitag, M. (2006). Bowling the state back in: Political institutions and the creation of social capital. *European Journal of Political Research* 45(1), 123–152.
- Freitag, M. (2021). *Das soziale Kapital der Schweiz*. Zürich: NZZ Libro.
- Freitag, M., P. Bundi, and M. F. Witzig (2019). *Milizarbeit in der Schweiz: Zahlen und Fakten zum politischen Leben in der Gemeinde*. Zürich: NZZ Libro.
- Frey, B. S., A. Briviba, and A. Gullo (2023). The impact of municipality mergers on political participation. *Swiss Political Science Review* 29(3), 330–347.
- Gerring, J., M. Palmer, J. Teorell, and D. Zarecki (2015). Demography and democracy. A global, district-level analysis of electoral contestation. *American Political Science Review* 109(3), 574–591.
- Geser, H., U. Meuli, A. Ladner, R. Steiner, and K. H. Papazian (2011). *Die Exekutivmitglieder in den Schweizer Gemeinden*. Glarus/Chur: Rüegger Verlag.
- Gulzar, S. (2021). Who enters politics and why? *Annual Review of Political Science* 24(1), 253–275.
- Hall, A. B. and J. Yoder (2022). Does homeownership influence political behavior? Evidence from administrative data. *Journal of Politics* 84(1), 351–366.
- Jakobsen, M. and U. Kjaer (2016). Political representation and geographical bias in amalgamated local governments. *Local Government Studies* 42(2), 208–227.
- Kaiser, C. (2014). Functioning and impact of incentives for amalgamations in a federal state: The Swiss case. *International Journal of Public Administration* 37(10), 625–637.
- Kletzing, U. and H. Lukoschat (2014). *Engagiert vor Ort – Wege und Erfahrungen von Kommunalpolitikerinnen*. Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend: Berlin.

- Koch, P. and P. Rochat (2017). The effects of local government consolidation on turnout: Evidence from a quasi-experiment in Switzerland. *Swiss Political Science Review* 23(3), 215–230.
- Ladner, A. (2016). Gemeindeversammlung und Gemeindeparlament: Überlegungen und empirische Befunde zur Ausgestaltung der Legislativfunktion in den Schweizer Gemeinden. Cahier de l'IDHEAP No. 292. Institut de Hautes Etudes en Administration Publique IDHEAP: University of Lausanne.
- Ladner, A. and J. Fiechter (2012). The influence of direct democracy on political interest, electoral turnout and other forms of citizens' participation in Swiss municipalities. *Local Government Studies* 38(4), 437–459.
- Ladner, A., N. Keuffer, and A. Bastianen (2023). Local autonomy around the world: The updated and extended local autonomy index (LAI 2.0). *Regional & Federal Studies*, 1–23.
- Ladner, A., R. Steiner, A. Haus, C. Kaiser, A. Bernier, N. Keuffer, and L. Reichmuth (2021). Dataset: Swiss Municipal Monitoring 1988-2017 / Schweizer Gemeindemonitoring 1988 bis 2017. Institut de Hautes Etudes en Administration Publique IDHEAP: University of Lausanne.
- Lawless, J. L. (2012). *Becoming a Candidate: Political Ambition and the Decision to Run for Office*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawless, J. L. and R. L. Fox (2010). *It Still Takes a Candidate: Why Women Don't Run for Office*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levine, M. D. and M. S. Hyde (1977). Incumbency and the theory of political ambition: A rational-choice model. *Journal of Politics* 39(4), 959–983.
- Mansbridge, J. (2009). A “selection model” of political representation. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 17(4), 369–398.
- McDonnell, J. (2020). Municipality size, political efficacy and political participation: A systematic review. *Local Government Studies* 46(3), 331–350.
- Morales, L. and P. Geurts (2007). Associational involvement. In: van Deth J.W. and Westholm A. (Eds.), *Citizenship and Involvement in European Democracies: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 130 – 152). London: Routledge.
- Mueller, S. and P. Dardanelli (2014). Language, political culture, and centralisation in Switzerland. *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparee* 21(4), 83–104.
- Müller, A. (2015). *Bürgerstaat und Staatsbürger: Milizpolitik zwischen Mythos und Moderne*. Zürich: Avenir Suisse.
- Osborne, M. J. and A. Slivinski (1996). A model of political competition with citizen-candidates. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 111(1), 65–96.

- Ostrom, E. (2000). Collective action and the evolution of social norms. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14(3), 137–158.
- Poliengine (2022). How many politicians are there in the USA? <https://poliengine.com/blog/how-many-politicians-are-there-in-the-us> (December 22nd, 2023).
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Putnam, R. D., R. Leonardi, and R. Y. Nonetti (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Revelli, F. (2016). Tax limits and local elections. *Public Choice* 166(1-2), 53–68.
- Rodrigues, M. and A. Tavares (2020). The effects of amalgamations on voter turnout: Evidence from sub-municipal governments in Portugal. *Cities* 101, 102685.
- Saarimaa, T. and J. Tukiainen (2016). Local representation and strategic voting: Evidence from electoral boundary reforms. *European Journal of Political Economy* 41, 31–45.
- Schlesinger, J. A. (1966). *Ambition and Politics: Political Careers in the United States*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Stadelmann-Steffen, I. and M. Freitag (2011). Making civil society work: Models of democracy and their impact on civic engagement. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40(3), 526–551.
- Steiner, R., A. Ladner, C. Kaiser, A. Haus, A. Amsellem, and N. Keuffer (2021). *Zustand und Entwicklung der Schweizer Gemeinden: Ergebnisse des nationalen Gemeindemonitorings 2017*. Glarus: Somedia Buchverlag.
- Stern.de (2024). Was verdient eigentlich ein Bürgermeister? *Stern.de*, November 11, 2024, available at <https://www.stern.de/wirtschaft/job/buergermeister-gehalt-was-verdient-ein-buergermeister-im-monat-8119706.html>.
- Strebel, M. A. (2018). Incited voluntary municipal mergers as a two-stage process: Evidence from the Swiss canton of Fribourg. *Urban Affairs Review* 54(2), 267–301.
- Strebel, M. A. (2025). The political economy of territorial integration referendums. *Territory, Politics, Governance* 13, 344–364.
- Stutzer, A., L. Goette, and M. Zehnder (2011). Active decisions and prosocial behaviour: A field experiment on blood donation. *Economic Journal* 121(556), F476–F493.
- Swianiewicz, P., A. Gendźwiłł, K. Houlberg, and J. E. Klausen (2022). *Municipal Territorial Reforms of the 21st Century in Europe*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2023a). Bilanz der ständigen Wohnbevölkerung nach Gemeinden 1981 – 2022. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung.html>. Accessed 29 August 2023.
- Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2023b). Erwerbstätige nach Wohn- und Arbeitsgemeinde, 2014, 2018 und 2020. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/mobilitaet-verkehr/personenverkehr/pendlermobilitaet.assetdetail.27885387.html>. Accessed 16 February 2024.
- Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2023c). Ständige Wohnbevölkerung nach Anwesenheitsdauer in der Gemeinde. Swiss Federal Statistical Office. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/bevoelkerung/erhebungen/statpop.html>. Accessed 30 April 2024.
- Swissinfo (2024). Oui or nein: Are languages a major fault line in Swiss direct democracy? *Swissinfo.ch*, June 10, 2024, available at <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/democracy/oui-or-nein-are-languages-a-major-fault-line-in-swiss-direct-democracy/80259060>.
- Tavares, A. (2018). Municipal amalgamations and their effects: A literature review. *Miscellanea Geographica* 22(1), 5–15.
- Vatter, A., T. Arnold, A. Arens, L.-R. Vogel, M. Bühlmann, H.-P. Schaub, O. Dlabac, R. Wirz, R. Freiburghaus, and D. D. Porta (2024). Dataset: Patterns of Democracy in the Swiss Cantons, 1979 – 2023. Institut für Politikwissenschaft: Universität Bern.
- Verba, S. and N. Nie (1972). *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Verba, S., K. L. Schlozman, and H. Brady (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, M. (2004). *The Vocation Lectures: Science as a Vocation, Politics as a Vocation*. New York, NY: Hackett Pub Co.
- Witzig, M. F. and A. Vatter (2023). *Direkte Demokratie in den Gemeinden*. Zürich: NZZ Libro.
- Wollebæk, D. and K. Strømsnes (2008). Voluntary associations, trust, and civic engagement: A multilevel approach. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 37(2), 249–263.
- Yoder, J. (2020). Does property ownership lead to participation in local politics? Evidence from property records and meeting minutes. *American Political Science Review* 114(4), 1213–1229.
- Zale, K. (2019). Part-time government. *Ohio State Law Journal* 80(5), 987–1054.

Latent Political Engagement: Insights from New Measures for Local Democracy

Tobias Schib¹ Michael A. Strebel² Alois Stutzer³

May 2025

Online Appendix

Additional statistics and results

A	Measurement and data	1
B	Individual characteristics	2
C	Local context	12
C.1	Municipal characteristics and organization	12
C.2	Latent political engagement by merger history	15
C.3	Selection into mergers	20
C.4	Differential merger consequences	22
D	Cantonal context	25

¹University of Basel, Faculty of Business and Economics, Peter Merian-Weg 6, 4002 Basel, Switzerland; Email: tobias.schib@unibas.ch; ORCID: [0009-0007-1872-5543](#).
²University of Bern, KPM Center for Public Management, Schanzeneckstrasse 1, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; Email: michael.strebel@unibe.ch; ORCID: [0000-0002-8983-8867](#).
³University of Basel, Faculty of Business and Economics, Peter Merian-Weg 6, 4002 Basel, Switzerland; Email: alois.stutzer@unibas.ch; ORCID: [0000-0002-7410-5513](#).

A Measurement and data

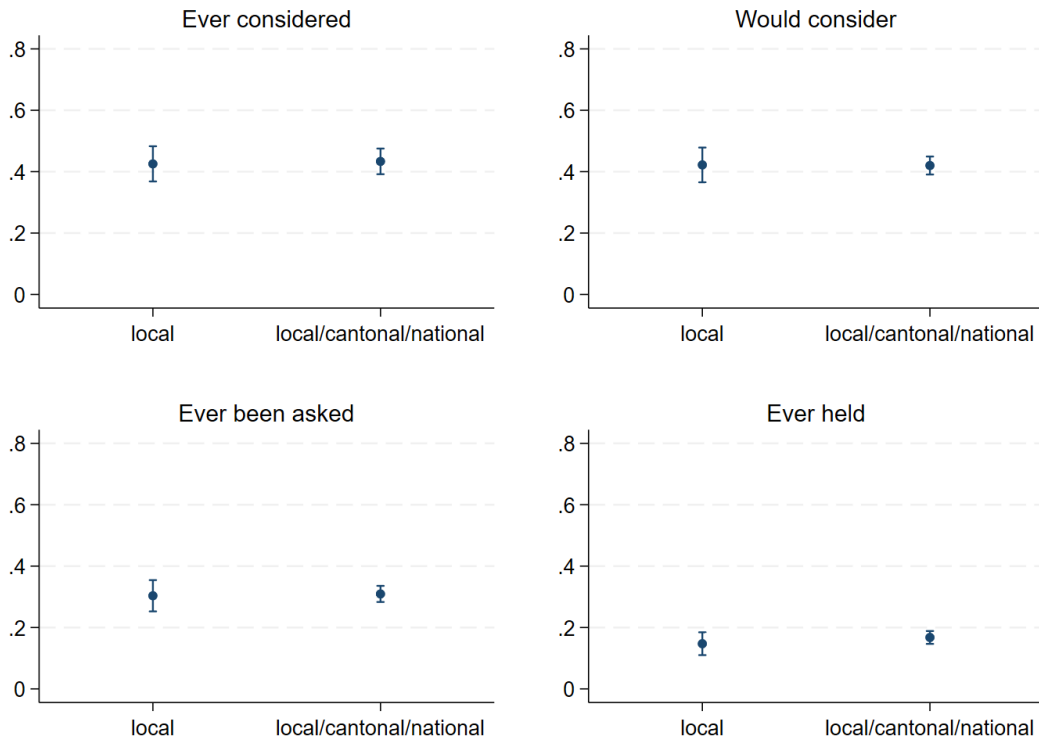
Table A.1: Cross-correlations for measures of (latent) political engagement

	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Ever considered	1			
Would consider	0.5324	1		
Ever been asked	0.4108	0.1898	1	
Ever held	0.4055	0.2836	0.587	1

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted cross-correlations for the four measures of (latent) political engagement. “*Ever considered*” corresponds to Question (1), “*Would consider*” to Question (3), “*Ever been asked*” to Question (2), and “*Ever held*” to Question (4). N = 8921 (unweighted).

Data sources: See Section 2.

Figure A.1: Predictions of (latent) political engagement conditional on survey questions



Notes: The graph shows the predicted values for the 4 variables of (latent) political engagement conditional on the question type in the survey, i.e., to which political level(s) is referred (see Section 2). Vertical lines depict 95% confidence intervals. It is controlled for the river sample throughout. N(local) = 754, N(local/cantonal/national) = 8,167.

Data sources: See Section 2.

B Individual characteristics

Table B.1: Mean values for (latent) political engagement by socio-economic and contextual characteristics

	n	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Overall	8921	0.44	0.42	0.31	0.16
Gender					
Male	4866	0.52	0.5	0.35	0.19
Female	4055	0.35	0.34	0.27	0.14
Age					
18-24	440	0.42	0.52	0.09	0.04
25-34	1369	0.54	0.5	0.22	0.1
35-44	1467	0.44	0.46	0.26	0.1
45-54	1665	0.41	0.4	0.32	0.14
55-64	1899	0.42	0.39	0.34	0.2
65-74	1522	0.43	0.34	0.45	0.26
75+	559	0.36	0.29	0.49	0.37
Education					
compulsory educ.	220	0.41	0.35	0.25	0.18
vocational educ.	1990	0.39	0.37	0.29	0.15
high school	814	0.46	0.45	0.25	0.11
second vocational	214	0.5	0.5	0.35	0.17
higher vocational	1360	0.51	0.48	0.41	0.23
university	4293	0.54	0.5	0.35	0.2
other	30	0.55	0.49	0.49	0.04
Income					
-3000 CHF	430	0.39	0.38	0.28	0.1
3000-5000 CHF	1101	0.38	0.35	0.31	0.17
5000-7000 CHF	1595	0.38	0.39	0.24	0.12
7000-9000 CHF	1686	0.45	0.43	0.33	0.19
9000-11000 CHF	1459	0.54	0.47	0.35	0.21
11000-13000 CHF	981	0.47	0.5	0.33	0.15
13000-15000 CHF	707	0.47	0.46	0.35	0.18
15000+ CHF	962	0.51	0.48	0.32	0.18
Employment					
self-employed	825	0.55	0.44	0.47	0.21
employed	5137	0.45	0.45	0.26	0.12
training/studying	372	0.46	0.53	0.12	0.05
homemaker	176	0.43	0.34	0.27	0.15
retired	2080	0.4	0.33	0.43	0.28
unemployed	331	0.34	0.36	0.27	0.16
Living situation					
tenant	4364	0.4	0.42	0.23	0.09
homeowner	4437	0.48	0.42	0.4	0.25
other	120	0.59	0.59	0.12	0.04
Association					

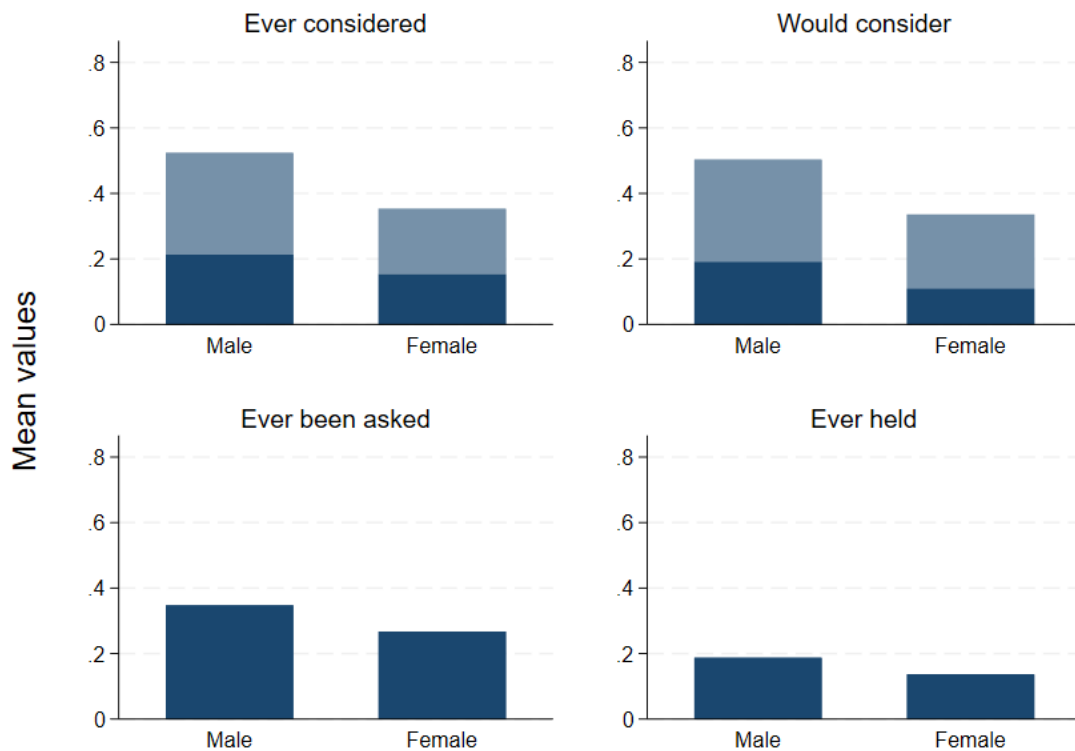
social	2382	0.59	0.55	0.46	0.26
church/religion	1244	0.53	0.5	0.37	0.26
education/arts	1429	0.54	0.47	0.43	0.24
environment	1123	0.54	0.49	0.42	0.21
party	1317	0.79	0.7	0.71	0.49
sports	3104	0.52	0.47	0.34	0.17
other	2843	0.54	0.52	0.39	0.22
no member	2424	0.24	0.28	0.15	0.06
Mun. size					
-999	390	0.66	0.58	0.39	0.33
1000-4999	2328	0.42	0.41	0.34	0.21
5000-9999	1447	0.49	0.41	0.29	0.15
10000-19999	1637	0.43	0.42	0.33	0.16
20000-49999	1355	0.36	0.38	0.29	0.11
50000+	1764	0.42	0.44	0.22	0.09
Mun. legislative					
assembly	3131	0.46	0.44	0.29	0.17
parliament	5730	0.42	0.41	0.32	0.16
ballot	60	0.55	0.37	0.31	0.23
Language					
german	4439	0.46	0.43	0.29	0.15
french	4127	0.35	0.37	0.32	0.17
italian	331	0.55	0.47	0.49	0.30
romansh	24	0.37	0.22	0.46	0.34
Canton					
AG	421	0.46	0.47	0.35	0.22
AI	9	0.48	0.48	0.26	0.21
AR	38	0.61	0.56	0.37	0.33
BE	1105	0.47	0.48	0.33	0.19
BL	224	0.43	0.48	0.25	0.1
BS	163	0.38	0.37	0.28	0.08
FR	587	0.36	0.32	0.27	0.14
GE	747	0.37	0.42	0.28	0.16
GL	18	0.34	0.29	0.24	0.07
GR	236	0.31	0.28	0.24	0.16
JU	164	0.39	0.42	0.49	0.27
LU	312	0.38	0.43	0.22	0.11
NE	397	0.29	0.26	0.37	0.16
NW	25	0.67	0.3	0.31	0.12
OW	31	0.48	0.54	0.4	0.24
SG	292	0.51	0.44	0.3	0.16
SH	71	0.61	0.5	0.3	0.02
SO	223	0.58	0.57	0.4	0.31
SZ	96	0.48	0.38	0.18	0.02
TG	171	0.46	0.38	0.41	0.23
TI	316	0.53	0.43	0.51	0.3
UR	15	0.92	0.91	0.1	0.05
VD	1522	0.38	0.4	0.33	0.19

VS	510	0.37	0.37	0.29	0.12
ZG	90	0.55	0.32	0.22	0.15
ZH	1138	0.42	0.39	0.24	0.09

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted means for the four measures of (latent) political engagement, both overall and broken down by socio-economic and contextual characteristics. “*Ever considered*” corresponds to Question (1), “*Would consider*” to Question (3), “*Ever been asked*” to Question (2), and “*Ever held*” to Question (4). The number of observations within each subgroup is unweighted.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

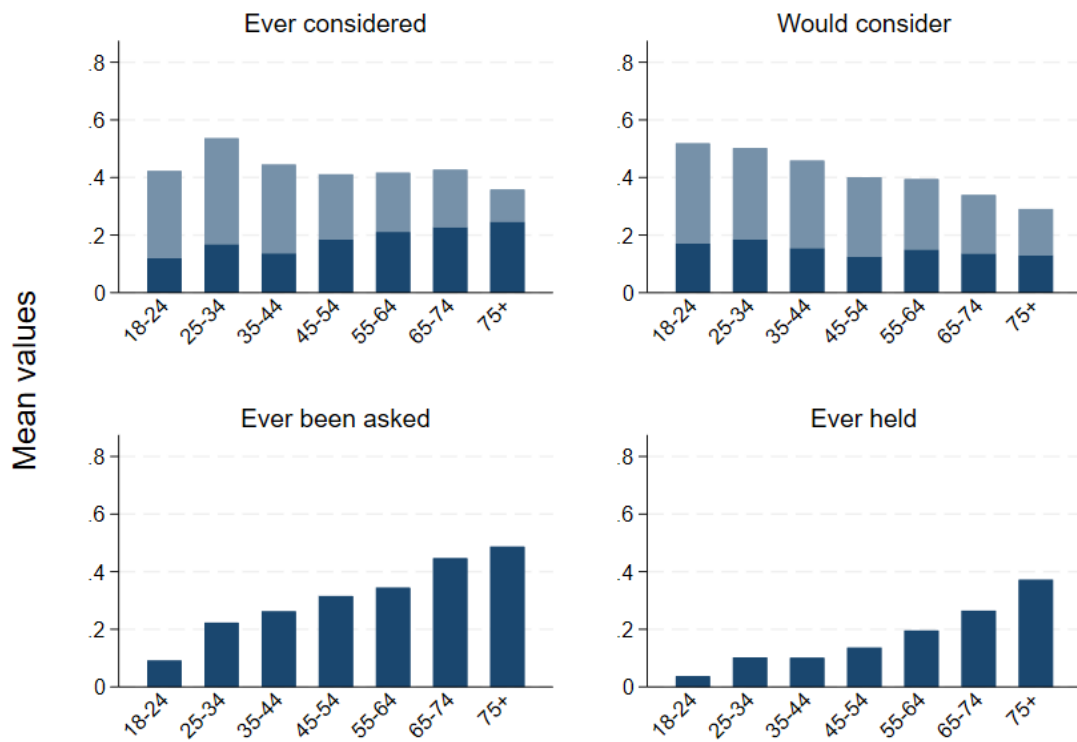
Figure B.1: Levels of (latent) political engagement by gender



Notes: This figure shows survey-weighted means for the four measures of (latent) political engagement, by gender. For the items “*Ever considered*” and “*Would consider*”, the dark blue segments represent respondents who have seriously considered holding political office or could clearly imagine doing so if asked. The light blue segments indicate those who have vaguely considered it or would rather imagine taking on such a role. Table B.1 provides the corresponding number of observations in each group.

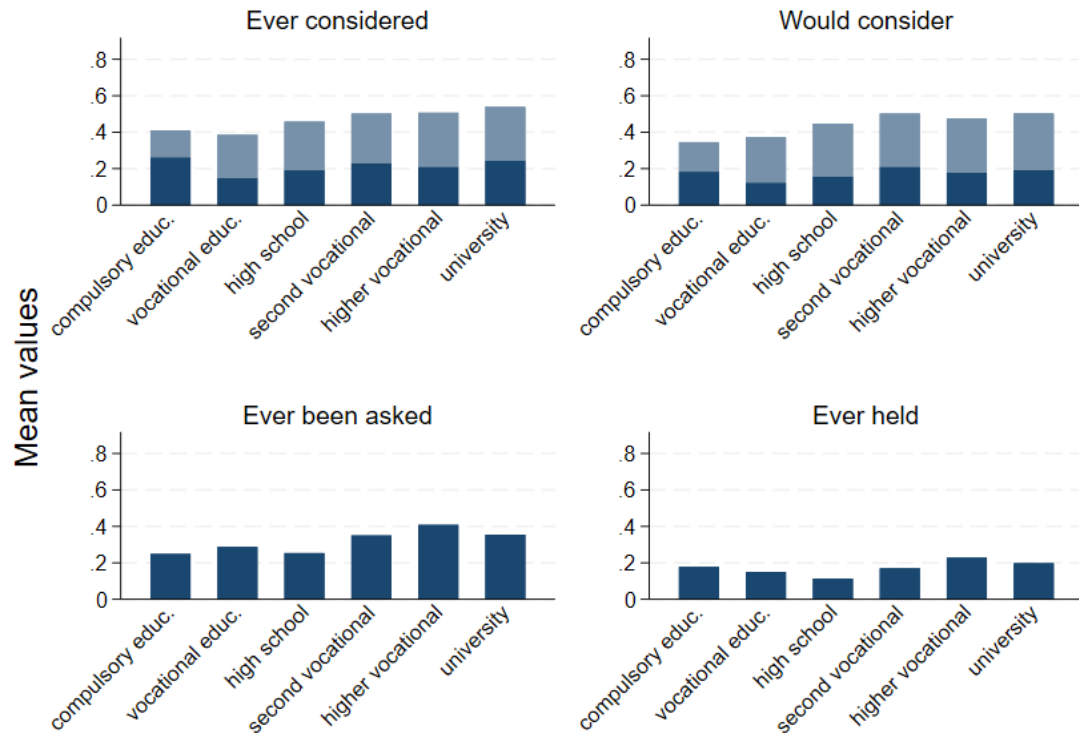
Data sources: See Section 2.

Figure B.2: Levels of (latent) political engagement by age group



Notes: This figure shows survey-weighted means for the four measures of (latent) political engagement, by age group. For the items “Ever considered” and “Would consider”, the dark blue segments represent respondents who have seriously considered holding political office or could clearly imagine doing so if asked. The light blue segments indicate those who have vaguely considered it or would rather imagine taking on such a role. Table B.1 provides the corresponding number of observations in each category. *Data sources:* See Section 2.

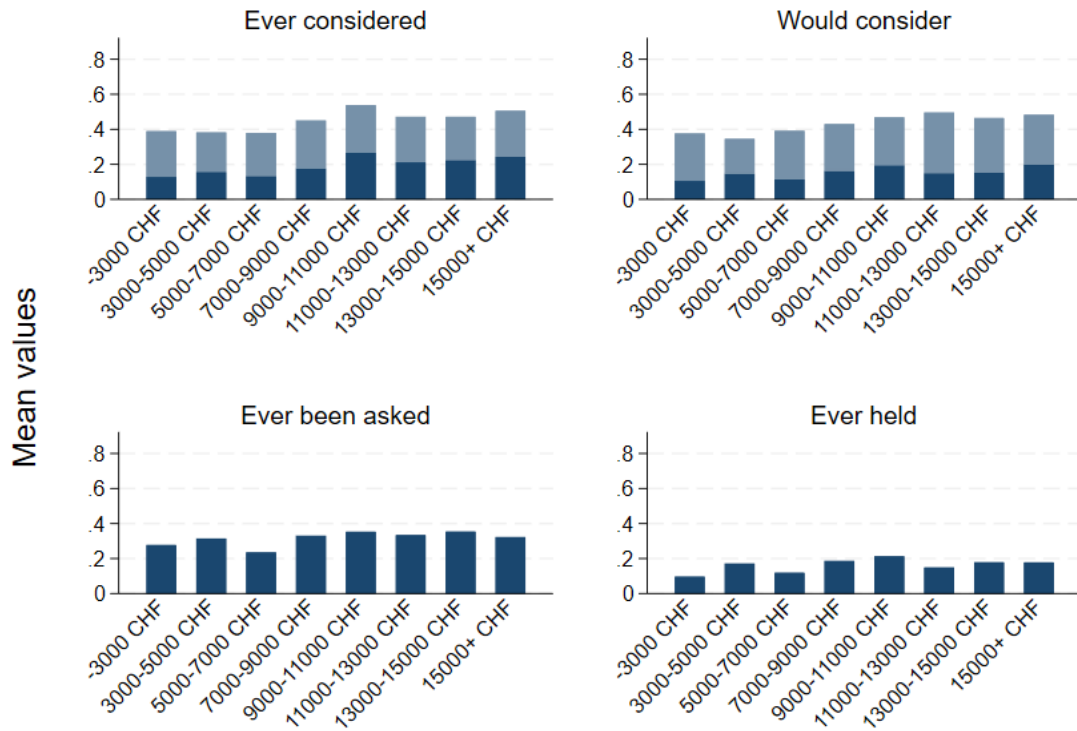
Figure B.3: Levels of (latent) political engagement by education group



Notes: This figure shows survey-weighted means for the four measures of (latent) political engagement, by education group. For the items “Ever considered” and “Would consider”, the dark blue segments represent respondents who have seriously considered holding political office or could clearly imagine doing so if asked. The light blue segments indicate those who have vaguely considered it or would rather imagine taking on such a role. Table B.1 provides the corresponding number of observations in each category.

Data sources: See Section 2.

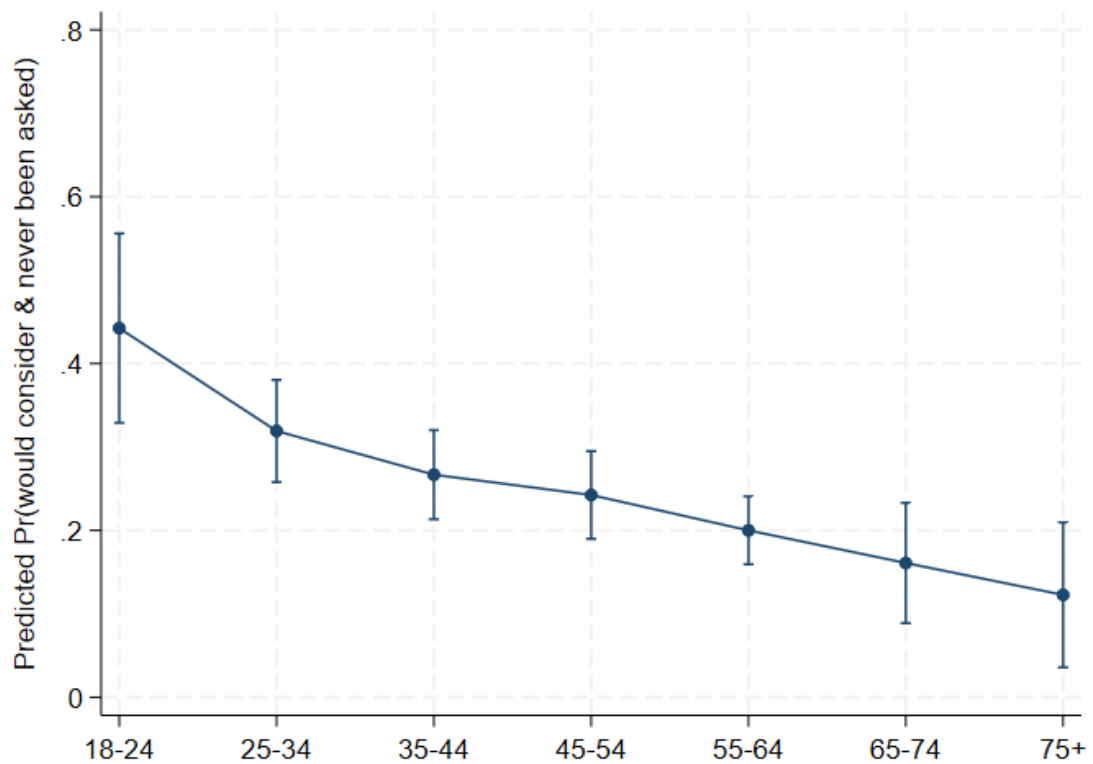
Figure B.4: Levels of (latent) political engagement by income group



Notes: This figure shows survey-weighted means for the four measures of (latent) political engagement, by income group. For the items “Ever considered” and “Would consider”, the dark blue segments represent respondents who have seriously considered holding political office or could clearly imagine doing so if asked. The light blue segments indicate those who have vaguely considered it or would rather imagine taking on such a role. Table B.1 provides the corresponding number of observations in each category.

Data sources: See Section 2.

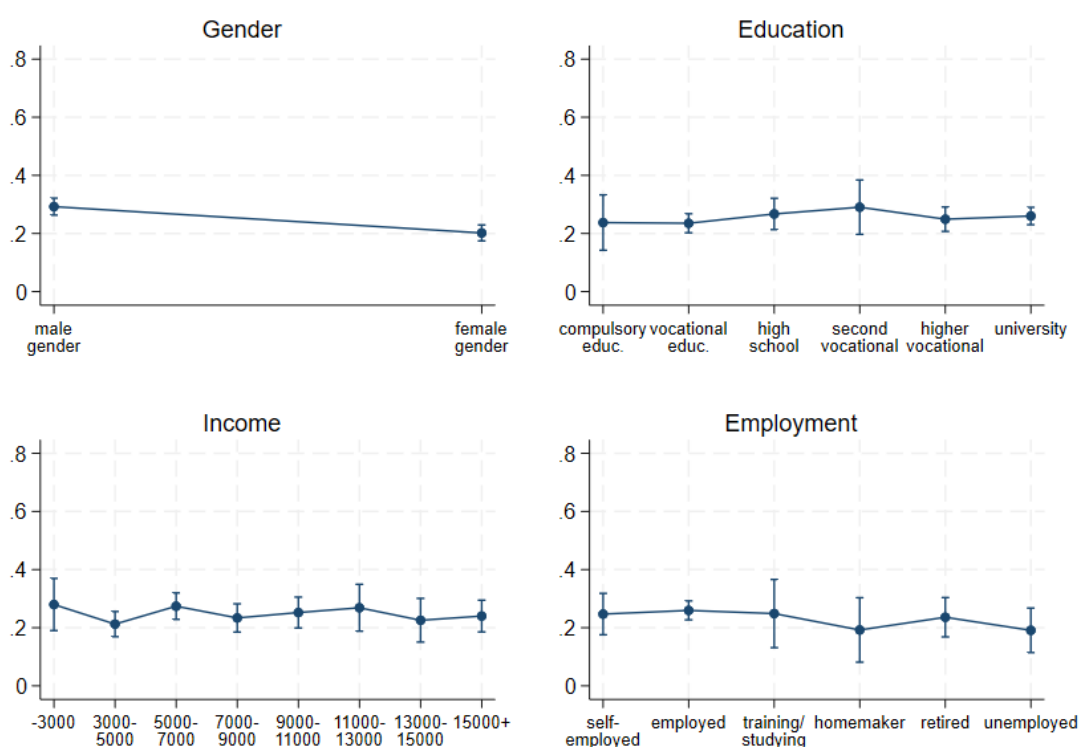
Figure B.5: Predicted probability of “untapped potential” conditional on age group



Notes: The graph shows the predicted values for the dependent variable “untapped potential”, which takes the value 1 if the respondent indicated that they would consider taking on a political office if asked but have never been asked before, and 0 otherwise. Apart from the change in the dependent variable, the linear probability model is specified in Equation (1), with 8,921 observations. The vertical lines depict 95% confidence intervals. $N(\text{untapped potential}) = 1,912$.

Data sources: See Section 2.

Figure B.6: Predicted probability of “untapped potential” conditional on gender, education, income and employment status



Notes: The four graphs show the predicted values for the dependent variable “untapped potential”, which takes the value 1 if the respondent indicated that they would consider taking on a political office if asked but have never been asked before, and 0 otherwise. Apart from the change in the dependent variable, the linear probability model is specified in Equation (1), with 8,921 observations. The vertical lines depict 95% confidence intervals. $N(\text{untapped potential}) = 1,912$.

Data sources: See Section 2.

Table B.2: Marginal effects of associational membership on (latent) political engagement

Dep. variable	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Association (no member)				
member	0.2317*** (0.0238)	0.1526*** (0.0271)	0.2105*** (0.0207)	0.1307*** (0.0152)
Indiv. controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mun. controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1586	0.1172	0.1760	0.1711
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

Table B.3: Marginal effects of associational membership by category on (latent) political engagement

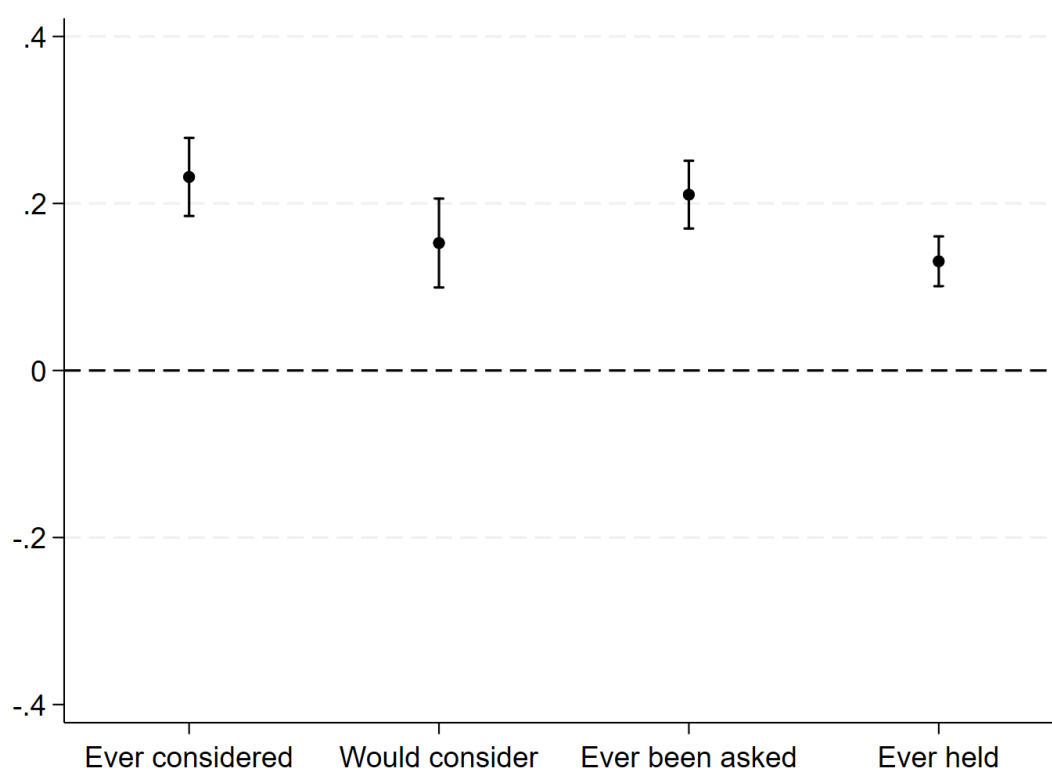
Dep. variable	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Association (no member)				
social	0.1214*** (0.0311)	0.0852*** (0.0328)	0.0931*** (0.0303)	0.0184 (0.0284)
church/religion	0.0415 (0.0357)	0.0054 (0.0351)	-0.0160 (0.0321)	0.0196 (0.0251)
education/arts	0.0669 (0.0411)	-0.0162 (0.0380)	0.0884** (0.0389)	0.0252 (0.0259)
environment	0.0405 (0.0343)	-0.0159 (0.0415)	0.0332 (0.0319)	-0.0453 (0.0298)
party	0.3791*** (0.0373)	0.2525*** (0.0388)	0.4273*** (0.0345)	0.3421*** (0.0330)
sports	0.1077*** (0.0277)	0.0262 (0.0287)	0.0504* (0.0258)	0.0028 (0.0216)
member in 2 assoc.	-0.0642* (0.0387)	-0.0287 (0.0409)	-0.0552 (0.0364)	0.0156 (0.0310)
member in 3+ assoc.	-0.0892 (0.0646)	0.0775 (0.0654)	-0.0194 (0.0633)	0.0536 (0.0538)
Indiv. controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mun. controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.2223	0.1766	0.2859	0.2963
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: $^* .05 < p < .1$, $^{**} .01 < p < .05$, $^{***} p < .01$.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

Figure B.7: Marginal effects of associational membership on (latent) political engagement



Notes: The graph shows the estimated marginal effects of membership in associations on the 4 variables of (latent) political engagement. Out of a total of 8,921 observations, 6,497 individuals report being active members of at least one association, while 2,424 individuals are not members of any association (see Appendix B, Table B.1). Table B.2 in Appendix B provides the corresponding estimates. Vertical lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

C Local context

C.1 Municipal characteristics and organization

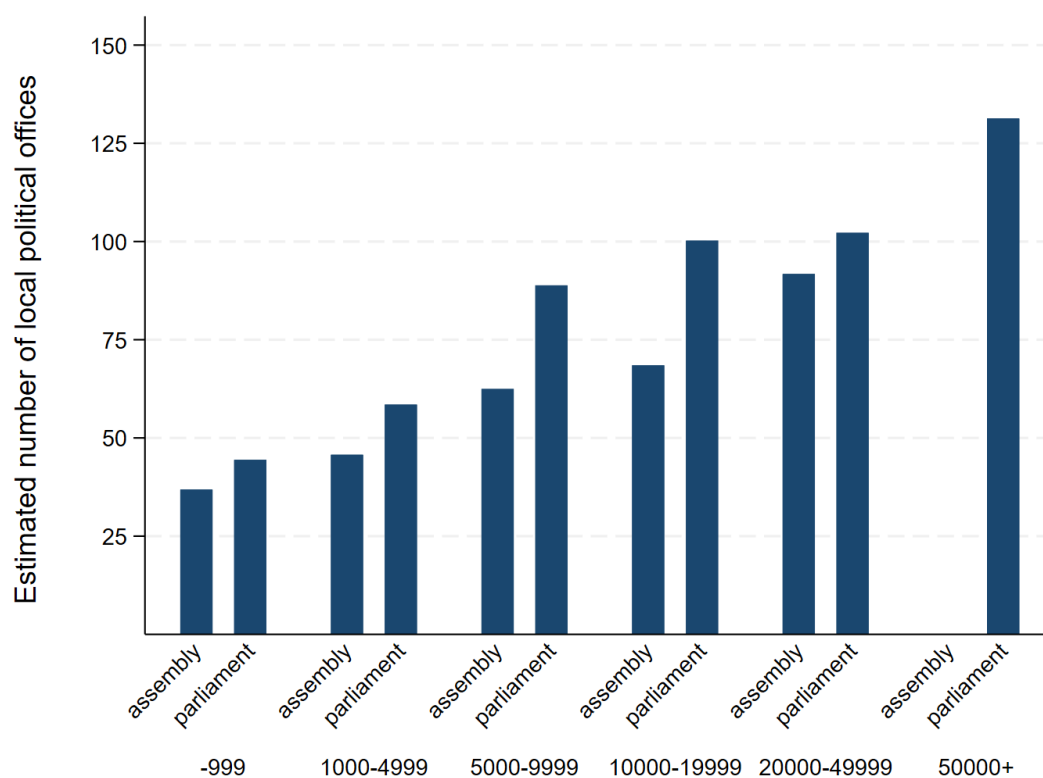
Table C.1.1: Marginal effects of municipal characteristics and organization on (latent) political engagement

Dep. variable	Ever considered	Would consider	Ever been asked	Ever held
Mun. size (1000-4999)				
-999	0.2182*** (0.0575)	0.1386** (0.0593)	0.0896 (0.0595)	0.1662*** (0.0540)
5000-9999	0.0403 (0.0352)	-0.0008 (0.0366)	-0.0565* (0.0325)	-0.0422* (0.0251)
10000-19999	0.0095 (0.0442)	0.0183 (0.0421)	-0.0152 (0.0365)	-0.0237 (0.0292)
20000-49999	-0.0902* (0.0492)	0.0248 (0.0511)	-0.1488*** (0.0457)	-0.1165*** (0.0359)
50000+	-0.0696 (0.0735)	0.0228 (0.0666)	-0.2735*** (0.0638)	-0.1446*** (0.0502)
Mun. characteristics				
parliament	0.0327 (0.0410)	-0.0467 (0.0373)	0.1009*** (0.0319)	0.0729*** (0.0282)
share long-term	-0.0586 (0.2844)	-0.1102 (0.2575)	-0.1160 (0.2496)	-0.1844 (0.1966)
share commuters	-0.1374 (0.1127)	-0.0943 (0.1124)	-0.2943*** (0.1044)	-0.0852 (0.0776)
Indiv. controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1586	0.1172	0.1760	0.1711
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

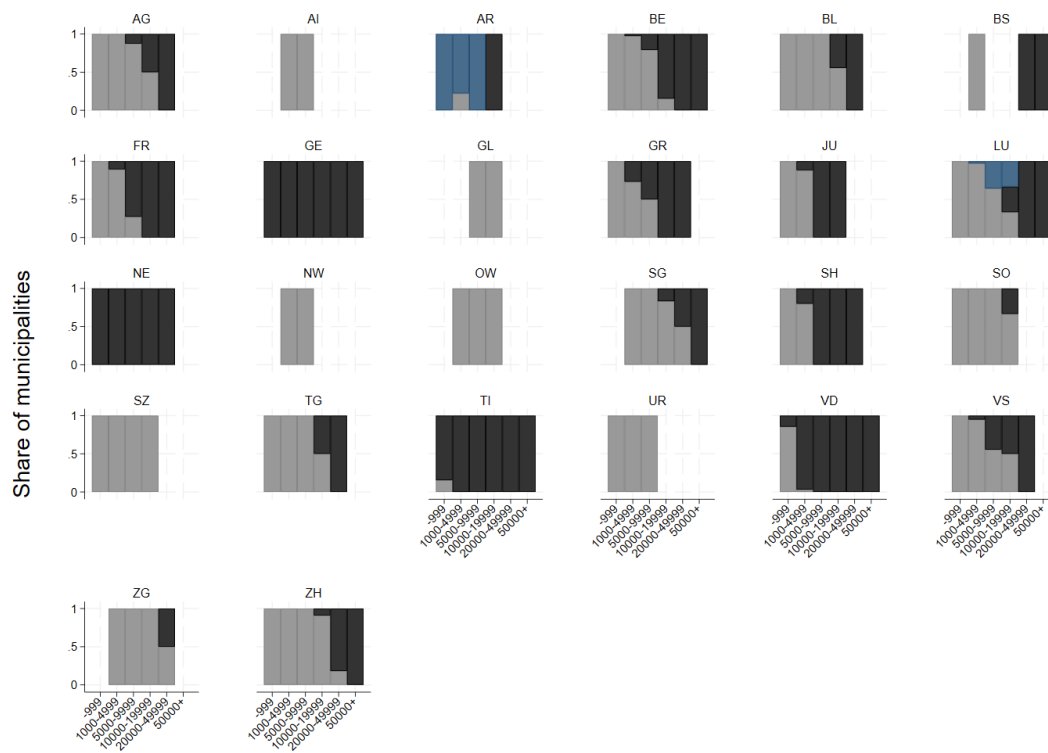
Figure C.1.1: Estimated number of local political offices by municipality size and local legislative



Notes: The figure shows the estimated average number of local political offices by municipality size and type of local legislative. To account for measurement error and missing information, the estimated number of local political offices per municipality is calculated as the average over the three municipal clerk surveys 2005, 2009, and 2017. Of the 1,463 municipalities present in our sample, 127 have missing information on the number of local political offices in all three survey waves. Consequently, the averages are based on data from 1,336 municipalities. Municipalities with more than 50,000 residents have municipal parliaments only.

Data sources: [Ladner et al. \(2021\)](#).

Figure C.1.2: Common support of local legislative within size categories and cantons



Notes: This figure plots the share of municipalities by canton and population size that has a municipal assembly (gray), a municipal parliament (black), or only the ballot (navy). Only municipalities from the observational sample, i.e., where respondents come from, are displayed.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3.

C.2 Latent political engagement by merger history

Table C.2.1: Marginal effect of merger history on having ever considered taking on pol. office

Dep. variable: Ever considered	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Merger history (no vote)				
fail	-0.0581 (0.0438)	-0.0608 (0.0439)	-0.0602 (0.0439)	-0.0589 (0.0438)
vote post	-0.0451 (0.0404)	-0.0434 (0.0405)	-0.0443 (0.0404)	-0.0455 (0.0401)
success	-0.0092 (0.0345)	0.0097 (0.0383)	-0.0004 (0.0379)	0.0033 (0.0455)
success × new name		-0.0811* (0.0461)		
success × high intensity			-0.0392 (0.0462)	
success × 5-10 years				-0.0527 (0.0595)
success × -5 years				0.0049 (0.0688)
Mun. size (1000-4999)				
-999	0.2126*** (0.0575)	0.2081*** (0.0575)	0.2105*** (0.0574)	0.2133*** (0.0578)
5000-9999	0.0445 (0.0342)	0.0414 (0.0342)	0.0427 (0.0344)	0.0420 (0.0340)
10000-19999	0.0206 (0.0404)	0.0168 (0.0404)	0.0183 (0.0407)	0.0176 (0.0405)
20000-49999	-0.0749* (0.0444)	-0.0842* (0.0453)	-0.0787* (0.0450)	-0.0756* (0.0449)
50000+	-0.0536 (0.0717)	-0.0610 (0.0722)	-0.0591 (0.0729)	-0.0613 (0.0725)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1590	0.1598	0.1592	0.1594
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

Table C.2.2: Marginal effect of merger history on would consider taking on pol. office if asked

Dep. variable: Would consider	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Merger history (no vote)				
fail	-0.0587 (0.0459)	-0.0606 (0.0460)	-0.0607 (0.0461)	-0.0579 (0.0460)
vote post	-0.0724 (0.0601)	-0.0711 (0.0600)	-0.0716 (0.0600)	-0.0737 (0.0600)
success	-0.0780** (0.0351)	-0.0648* (0.0384)	-0.0696* (0.0375)	-0.0628 (0.0427)
success \times new name		-0.0566 (0.0510)		
success \times high intensity			-0.0370 (0.0546)	
success \times 5-10 years				-0.0118 (0.0627)
success \times -5 years				-0.0493 (0.0716)
Mun. size (1000-4999)				
-999	0.1359** (0.0577)	0.1328** (0.0579)	0.1340** (0.0578)	0.1365** (0.0577)
5000-9999	-0.0112 (0.0355)	-0.0134 (0.0354)	-0.0129 (0.0357)	-0.0095 (0.0352)
10000-19999	0.0003 (0.0390)	-0.0023 (0.0390)	-0.0018 (0.0391)	0.0021 (0.0388)
20000-49999	0.0025 (0.0433)	-0.0040 (0.0440)	-0.0010 (0.0437)	0.0043 (0.0434)
50000+	-0.0166 (0.0608)	-0.0218 (0.0611)	-0.0219 (0.0620)	-0.0201 (0.0618)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1178	0.1182	0.1180	0.1181
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

Table C.2.3: Marginal effect of merger history on ever been asked to take on pol. office

Dep. variable: Ever been asked	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Merger history (no vote)				
fail	-0.0501 (0.0401)	-0.0501 (0.0402)	-0.0514 (0.0402)	-0.0494 (0.0401)
vote post	-0.0007 (0.0442)	-0.0007 (0.0442)	-0.0002 (0.0441)	-0.0011 (0.0443)
success	-0.0264 (0.0296)	-0.0269 (0.0334)	-0.0212 (0.0330)	-0.0254 (0.0310)
success × new name		0.0018 (0.0442)		
success × high intensity			-0.0232 (0.0482)	
success × 5-10 years				0.0177 (0.0616)
success × -5 years				-0.0230 (0.0627)
Mun. size (1000-4999)				
-999	0.0696 (0.0600)	0.0697 (0.0600)	0.0684 (0.0600)	0.0695 (0.0600)
5000-9999	-0.0456 (0.0323)	-0.0456 (0.0321)	-0.0467 (0.0323)	-0.0438 (0.0322)
10000-19999	0.0221 (0.0357)	0.0222 (0.0355)	0.0208 (0.0356)	0.0241 (0.0358)
20000-49999	-0.0886** (0.0450)	-0.0884* (0.0453)	-0.0908** (0.0453)	-0.0876** (0.0445)
50000+	-0.2169*** (0.0649)	-0.2167*** (0.0648)	-0.2201*** (0.0652)	-0.2150*** (0.0669)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1730	0.1730	0.1731	0.1732
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

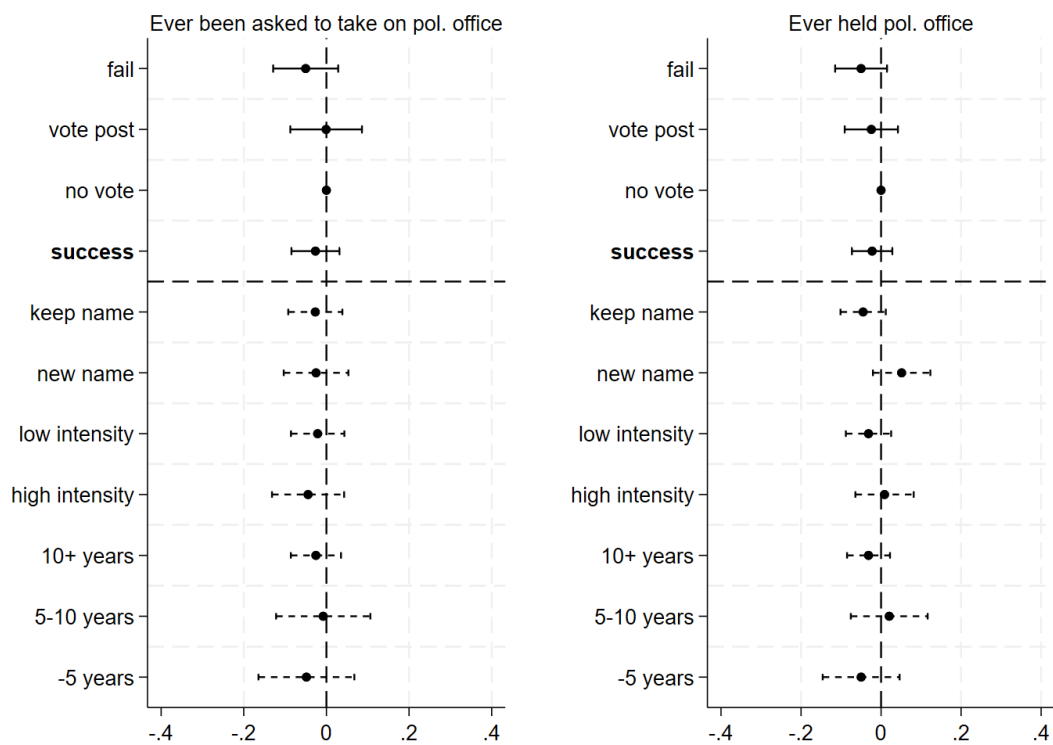
Table C.2.4: Marginal effect of merger history on ever held pol. office

Dep. variable: Ever held	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Merger history (no vote)				
fail	-0.0499 (0.0330)	-0.0467 (0.0331)	-0.0478 (0.0331)	-0.0488 (0.0330)
vote post	-0.0243 (0.0339)	-0.0265 (0.0340)	-0.0252 (0.0338)	-0.0243 (0.0341)
success	-0.0223 (0.0257)	-0.0447 (0.0289)	-0.0314 (0.0289)	-0.0313 (0.0274)
success \times new name		0.0962** (0.0391)		
success \times high intensity			0.0401 (0.0404)	
success \times 5-10 years				0.0518 (0.0511)
success \times -5 years				-0.0185 (0.0522)
Mun. size (1000-4999)				
-999	0.1517*** (0.0543)	0.1569*** (0.0540)	0.1538*** (0.0542)	0.1511*** (0.0543)
5000-9999	-0.0344 (0.0243)	-0.0307 (0.0243)	-0.0326 (0.0244)	-0.0313 (0.0244)
10000-19999	0.0031 (0.0295)	0.0075 (0.0293)	0.0054 (0.0292)	0.0066 (0.0298)
20000-49999	-0.0734** (0.0311)	-0.0624** (0.0304)	-0.0696** (0.0307)	-0.0722** (0.0308)
50000+	-0.1034** (0.0480)	-0.0947** (0.0471)	-0.0977** (0.0473)	-0.0963* (0.0494)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1692	0.1712	0.1695	0.1700
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

Figure C.2.1: Ever been asked to take on pol. office and ever held pol. office across municipalities grouped by merger history



Notes: Tables C.2.3 and C.2.4 in Appendix C provide the corresponding estimates. Horizontal lines depict 95% confidence intervals.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

C.3 Selection into mergers

Experts, both in Switzerland and internationally, frequently mention that recruitment difficulties for local political offices can be a driving force to enter merger negotiations with other, often neighboring, municipalities (see, e.g., [Swianiewicz et al. 2022](#), p. 100; [Steiner et al. 2021](#), p. 137). This implies a potential reverse causality between (latent) political engagement and municipal mergers. To systematically examine the potential effect of political involvement on the probability of a municipality to engage in a merger process, we estimate the following linear probability model:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{merger vote}_{m,c} = & \alpha + \delta_1 * \text{recruitment problem}_{m,c} + \delta_2 * \text{recently merged}_{m,c} + \delta_3 * \text{pop}_{m,c} \\ & + \rho_c + \varepsilon_{m,c} \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

The key variable in this equation is *recruitment problem*, which indicates whether a municipality faces difficulties in finding enough qualified candidates for local political offices. To measure this, we use data from the survey among municipal clerks conducted by [Ladner et al. \(2021\)](#). In 2009 (with a reference date of October 1), municipal clerks were asked whether their municipality experienced recruitment difficulties for local political offices.¹ Based on their responses, we generate the variable *recruitment problem*, which is coded as 1 if the municipal clerk reported that it was difficult or very difficult to find enough candidates, and 0 otherwise. This variable is available for a sample of 1,407 municipalities.

The dependent variable *merger vote* is coded as 1 if the surveyed municipality participated in a merger project after the survey date (i.e., after October 1, 2009) that was put to a vote, regardless of whether the merger was ultimately accepted or rejected. Additionally, since some municipalities in the 2009 survey had already resulted from a previous merger, we include the variable *recently merged* in certain specifications. This variable indicates whether a municipality had undergone a merger in the 10 years prior to the survey (from January 1999 to September 2009).

We control for population size (*pop*) and canton fixed effects (ρ), as both factors are significantly related to the likelihood of municipal mergers. Smaller municipalities and those in cantons where mergers were financially incentivized at the cantonal level (e.g., in the canton of Fribourg) were substantially more likely to merge ([Kaiser 2014](#)).

It is important to note that this analysis also faces potential feedback effects. An impending merger or merger vote could influence the municipal clerk’s assessment of recruitment problems. For instance, recruitment difficulties might be cited as a justification for a merger project, even if, for example, financial reasons (e.g., potential cost-savings in public services) were the primary driver. Alternatively, the prospect of a merger could discourage individuals from running for municipal council, as fewer council positions would be available post-merger and political office might become

¹The exact wording of the question was (English translation): “How difficult is it in your municipality to find enough qualified candidates for vacant municipal executive offices?”.

more demanding. These feedback effects are likely to be strongest in the period shortly after the 2009 survey. Therefore, we conduct a robustness check by excluding municipalities that either held a merger vote or implemented a merger between October 2009 and December 2011.

Table C.3.1 presents the results. Depending on the specification, we find that recruitment problems increase the probability of holding a merger vote by 4 to 5.5 percentage points. In our preferred specification – where we exclude municipalities that either held a merger vote or implemented a merger between October 2009 and December 2011 – we estimate an effect of 4 percentage points, which is statistically significant at the 10% level. This effect is also substantively meaningful, given that the mean probability of holding a merger vote between January 2012 and December 2023 is 25%.²

Table C.3.1: Probability of holding a merger vote conditional on stated recruitment problems

Dep. variable: Merger vote	Oct 2009 - Dec 2023	Oct 2009 - Dec 2023	Jan 2012 - Dec 2023
recruitment problem	0.0550** (0.0237)	0.0545** (0.0237)	0.0401* (0.0237)
recently merged		-0.0541 (0.0611)	-0.0599 (0.0599)
Mun. size (1000-4999)			
-999	0.1714*** (0.0270)	0.1693*** (0.0270)	0.1699*** (0.0274)
5000-9999	-0.0215 (0.0368)	-0.0220 (0.0368)	-0.0580* (0.0319)
10000-19999	0.0454 (0.0547)	0.0475 (0.0546)	0.0365 (0.0532)
20000-49999	-0.1133** (0.0476)	-0.1089** (0.0477)	-0.0775 (0.0529)
50000+	-0.0052 (0.1506)	-0.0076 (0.1507)	0.0662 (0.1724)
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mergers / votes excl.	None	None	Oct 2009 - Dec 2011
R-squared	0.2045	0.2051	0.1867
Observations	1,407	1,407	1,266

Notes: The sample comprises all municipalities that provided information on recruitment difficulties as of October 1, 2009 (N = 1,407). In the second specification, we control for municipalities that merged recently before the survey (i.e., between January 1999 and September 2009). The third specification excludes municipalities that either held a merger vote or implemented a merger between October 2009 and December 2011. Municipality size is included as of January 1, 2009. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See [Ladner et al. \(2021\)](#) for information on reported recruitment difficulties in municipalities in 2009 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

²Furthermore, we find that small municipalities are much more likely to be part of a merger project. This is consistent with other studies (see, e.g., [Strebel 2018](#)).

C.4 Differential merger consequences

Even with potential selection into merger projects, we can examine differential effects of municipal amalgamation, i.e., certain groups of residents might be more affected by municipal mergers than others. In particular, homeowners whose main asset often consists in their property, face new political circumstances that might for instance impact zoning decisions. Homeowners in pre-merger jurisdictions that experience a more intense merger, and hence disproportionately lose political influence, might be especially concerned. This group of respondents might, thus, exhibit an *increase* in latent political engagement after a merger, because they want to make sure their interests are represented in the new municipality. Further analyses reported in Tables C.4.1 and C.4.2 suggest that this is the case. While the level in latent political engagement is particularly lower among tenants in pre-merger municipalities that changed name or that experienced an intense merger, this level difference is not observed among homeowners. A possible interpretation is that homeowners are politically mobilized when they risk to be in a minority position in their new municipality. This finding ties in nicely with the territorial rallying around candidates from one's own pre-merger municipality that scholars found in the Danish and Finnish context ([Jakobsen and Kjaer 2016](#); [Saarimaa and Tukiainen 2016](#)). Fitting this interpretation, homeowners are not more likely to consider political office if asked than tenants in municipalities that failed to merge.

Table C.4.1: Differential marginal effect of merger history with respect to homeownership on having ever considered taking on pol. office

Dep. variable: Ever considered	(1)	(2)	(3)
Living situation (tenant)			
homeowner	0.0404 (0.0303)	0.0399 (0.0304)	0.0397 (0.0304)
Merger history (no vote)			
fail	-0.0187 (0.0643)	-0.0211 (0.0645)	-0.0211 (0.0645)
vote post	-0.0750* (0.0426)	-0.0760* (0.0423)	-0.0761* (0.0424)
success	-0.0179 (0.0458)		
success × keep name		0.0036 (0.0495)	
success × new name		-0.1327** (0.0602)	
success × low intensity			0.0014 (0.0502)
success × high intensity			-0.1113** (0.0562)
Differential effects			
fail × homeowner	-0.0698 (0.0788)	-0.0713 (0.0786)	-0.0706 (0.0786)
vote post × homeowner	0.0865 (0.1196)	0.0877 (0.1202)	0.0878 (0.1201)
success × homeowner	0.0315 (0.0545)		
success × keep name × homeowner		0.0109 (0.0635)	
success × new name × homeowner		0.1359* (0.0778)	
success × low intensity × homeowner			-0.0053 (0.0628)
success × high intensity × homeowner			0.1467* (0.0793)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1606	0.1634	0.1622
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

Table C.4.2: Differential marginal effect of merger history with respect to homeownership on would consider taking on pol. office if asked

Dep. variable: Would consider	(1)	(2)	(3)
Living situation (tenant)			
homeowner	0.0181 (0.0308)	0.0172 (0.0307)	0.0165 (0.0307)
Merger history (no vote)			
fail	0.0507 (0.0620)	0.0484 (0.0620)	0.0476 (0.0620)
vote post	-0.0612 (0.0649)	-0.0632 (0.0651)	-0.0622 (0.0650)
success	-0.0817* (0.0481)		
success × keep name		-0.0489 (0.0508)	
success × new name		-0.2489*** (0.0574)	
success × low intensity			-0.0493 (0.0508)
success × high intensity			-0.2306*** (0.0623)
Differential effects			
fail × homeowner	-0.2016** (0.0788)	-0.2026** (0.0789)	-0.2020** (0.0789)
vote post × homeowner	-0.0331 (0.0909)	-0.0299 (0.0918)	-0.0308 (0.0916)
success × homeowner	0.0161 (0.0607)		
success × keep name × homeowner		-0.0461 (0.0681)	
success × new name × homeowner		0.2316*** (0.0648)	
success × low intensity × homeowner			-0.0544 (0.0668)
success × high intensity × homeowner			0.2221*** (0.0727)
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1208	0.1250	0.1241
Observations	8,921	8,921	8,921

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. Reference categories are indicated in brackets. Control variables do not include the local legislative. Standard errors are clustered at municipal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Strebel \(2025\)](#) for the data on municipal mergers.

D Cantonal context

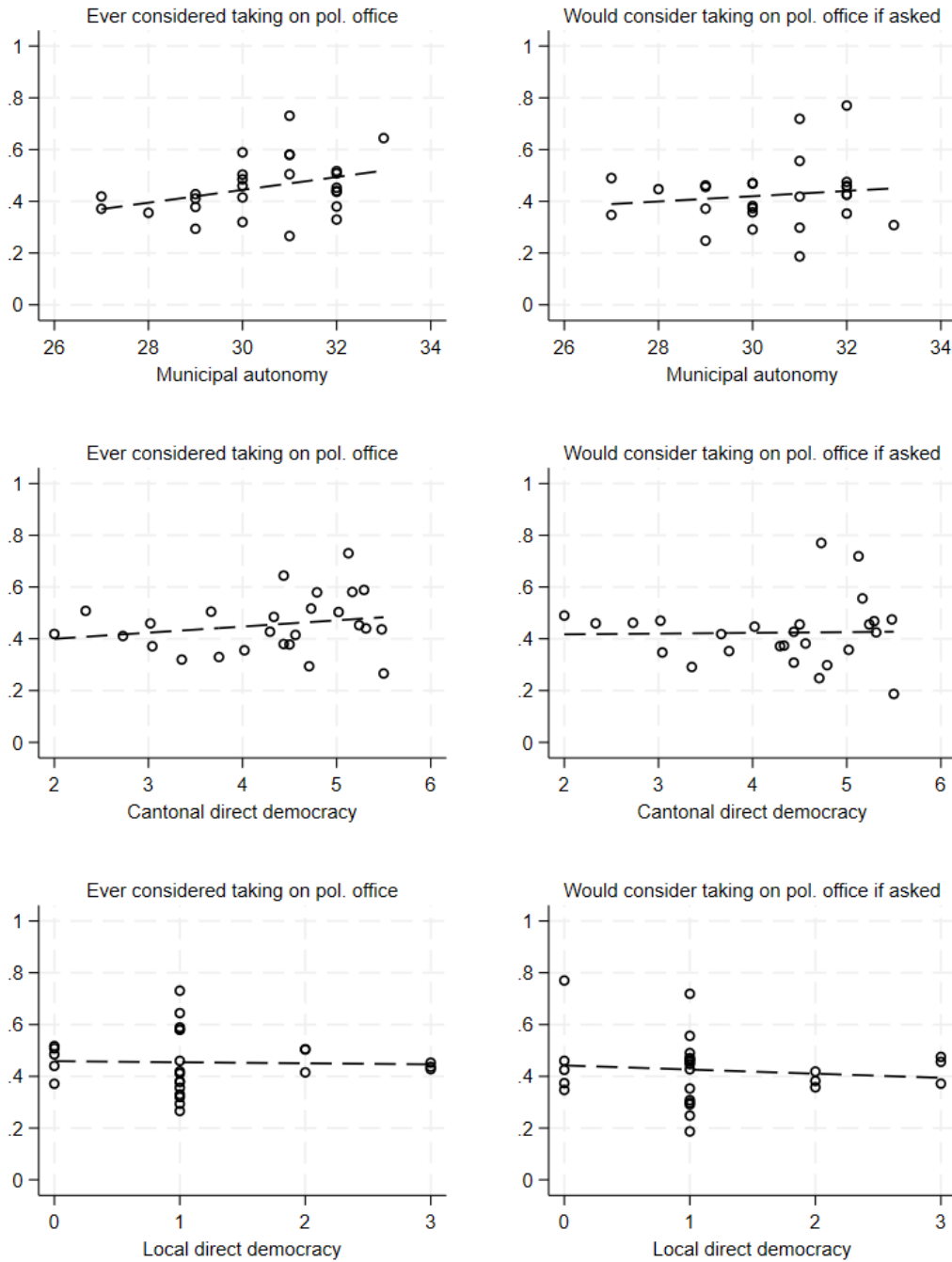
Table D.1: Culture vs. formal institutions and latent political engagement (robustness check)

Dep. variable	Ever considered		Would consider	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Language (french)				
german	0.1026** (0.0435)	0.1120* (0.0637)	0.0353 (0.0511)	0.0589 (0.0582)
italian	0.1224** (0.0522)	0.2515** (0.1049)	0.0375 (0.0540)	0.2989*** (0.0866)
Cantonal institutions				
local autonomy	0.0113 (0.0080)		0.0135 (0.0092)	
cantonal direct democracy	-0.0121 (0.0170)		-0.0212 (0.0227)	
local direct democracy	-0.0164 (0.0155)		-0.0052 (0.0184)	
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Municipal controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canton-FE	No	Yes	No	Yes
Question-FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
River sample	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared	0.1417	0.1522	0.0961	0.1118
Observations	8,785	8,785	8,785	8,785

Notes: The table presents survey-weighted least squares regression estimates. The coefficient for Romansh-speaking is not displayed due to the small number of observations. Cantons with a sample size of less than 50 respondents (i.e., AI, AR, GL, NW, OW, UR) are excluded. Standard errors are clustered at cantonal level. Significance levels: *.05 < p < .1, ** .01 < p < .05, *** p < .01.

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Ladner et al. \(2023\)](#) for the measure of local autonomy, [Vatter et al. \(2024\)](#) for the measure of cantonal direct democracy and [Witzig and Vatter \(2023\)](#) for the measure of local direct democracy.

Figure D.1: Latent political engagement conditional on municipal autonomy and direct democracy



Notes: The figure shows the linear predictions of latent political engagement from Figure 4, plotted against municipal autonomy and direct democracy (at cantonal and local level). The dashed line is a linear fit of the point cloud. Higher numerical values for municipal autonomy (direct democracy) indicate greater municipal competencies (more extensive direct democratic rights).

Data sources: See Sections 2 and 3 as well as [Ladner et al. \(2023\)](#) for the measure of municipal autonomy, [Vatter et al. \(2024\)](#) for the measure of cantonal direct democracy, and [Witzig and Vatter \(2023\)](#) for the measure of local direct democracy.