

**Zeitschrift:** SVPW-Jahrbuch = Annuaire ASSP  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft  
**Band:** 31 (1991)

**Artikel:** The influence of the initiative on the Swiss and American women's suffrage movements  
**Autor:** Banaszak, Lee Ann  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-172844>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 03.04.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Lee Ann Banaszak

## The Influence of the Initiative on the Swiss and American Women's Suffrage Movements.\*

This article examines the use of the initiative by women's suffrage movements in Switzerland and the United States. Proponents of direct democracy and scholars writing about *political opportunity structure* both argue that the initiative should provide more access to excluded groups. Evidence concerning the use of the initiative by *American women's suffrage organizations* supports this literature. However, initiative rights do not appear to have helped the Swiss women's suffrage movement gain access on either the national or the local level. In fact, although rules concerning initiatives are more open in Switzerland, only a few large cantonal women's suffrage organizations utilized this institution of direct democracy. While the use of initiatives by Swiss women's suffrage organizations did speed the enfranchisement of women, this is not true in the United States. The article concludes that a focus on this direct democratic institution alone is not sufficient to explain the political mobilization or success of challenging groups.

L'article examine l'emploi de l'initiative par des mouvements de suffrage féminin en Suisse et aux Etats-Unis. Des partisans de la démocratie directe et des scientifiques écrivant sur des sujets concernant la structure des opportunités politiques argumentent que l'initiative devrait donner plus d'accès aux groupes qui sont exclus du système politique. Il est évident que l'emploi de l'initiative par des organisations américaines de suffrage féminins confirme cette littérature. Et pourtant, les droits d'initiative ne semblent pas avoir aidé le mouvement de suffrage des femmes suisses à y accéder tant sur le plan national que local. En fait, bien que les règles concernant les initiatives sont plus «ouvertes» en Suisse, il n'y a que quelques larges organisations cantonales de suffrage féminin qui ont utilisé cette institution de démocratie directe. Alors que l'emploi d'initiatives par des organisations suisses de suffrage féminin a accéléré l'admission des femmes au suffrage, ceci n'est pas vrai pour les Etats-Unis. L'article conclut qu'une mise en évidence de cette institution de démocratie directe n'est à elle seule pas suffisante pour expliquer la mobilisation ou le succès de groupes lançant un défi aux autorités.

Der Artikel untersucht den Gebrauch der Initiative durch Frauenstimmrechtsbewegungen in der Schweiz und in den Vereinigten Staaten. Sowohl Anhänger der direkten Demokratie als auch Wissenschaftler, die sich zum Thema der politischen Chancenstruktur äussern, kommen beide zum

\* This research was supported in part by a Swiss National Science Grant and by a grant from the American Political Science Association.

Schluss, dass die Initiative den Zugang zum politischen System für Aussenseiter erleichtern sollte. Es ist offensichtlich, dass der Gebrauch der Initiative durch amerikanische Frauenstimmrechtsorganisationen diese Literatur bestätigt. Dagegen scheint das Initiativrecht der schweizerischen Frauenstimmrechtsbewegung nicht zu besserem Zugang auf nationaler und lokaler Ebene verholfen zu haben. Obwohl die Regeln betreffend der Initiativen in der Schweiz «offener» sind, haben tatsächlich nur ein paar grosse kantonale Frauenstimmrechtsorganisationen diese Institution der direkten Demokratie benutzt. Während der Gebrauch von Initiativen durch Schweizer Frauenstimmrechtsorganisationen den Zutritt der Frauen zum Stimmrecht beschleunigt hat, gilt dies nicht für die Vereinigten Staaten. Der Artikel schliesst mit der Folgerung, dass es nicht genügt, sich ausschliesslich auf diese direktdemokratische Institution zu konzentrieren, um die politische Mobilisation oder den Erfolg von Gruppen zu erklären, welche das politische System herausfordern.

## I. Introduction

The initiative is often viewed as empowering unorganized citizens and groups which lack access to political institutions. With initiative rights, all citizens (and not just government officials) may participate directly in the development of legislation. In this sense, the initiative provides for greater citizen involvement in the creation of laws (Schmidt, 1989). Because the general public may bypass the decisions (or nondecisions) of elected representatives, the initiative also allows popular control of public officials and permits ultimate decisions to be made by the people (Steiner, 1981, p. 6).

In addition, the right of initiative is perceived as providing less powerful public interests with a means of placing their issues on the national agenda (Kerr, 1987). It therefore permits groups who may be dissatisfied with public policy but who do not exercise much influence in government a means of expressing their interests. In this view, then, initiatives are the instruments which can be used by challengers<sup>1</sup> to the political system to initiate reform.

In fact, many authors note that the initiative is a powerful instrument even when the resulting legislation is rejected by the voters. While historically most Swiss initiatives have not become legislation (Hertig, 1984), nonetheless Linder (1987) argues that initiatives force the government to act even when they lose. He states that the introduction of an initiative on atomic energy provoked the government into revising its energy policy. Moreover, even where governments themselves do not react, initiatives may bring issues onto the public agenda and provide the opportunity for groups to attempt to influence public opinion (Cronin, 1989 and Magleby, 1988). Thus, the initiative is viewed as aiding the causes of opposition groups or challengers to the system because it grants them direct access to the public agenda.

The literature on social movements, although not explicitly concerned with the institutions of direct democracy, has recently begun to focus on the importance of

<sup>1</sup> I use the term «challengers» in the same sense as Tilly (1978) and McAdam (1982). It refers to any group which is not a member of the polity but which is trying to influence the government.

the «political opportunity structure» (Eisinger, 1973; Tarrow, 1989, 1988; Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi, 1990). These authors argue that the political context of a movement affects the movement itself and the success of the movement. All of these authors agree on that the characteristics of government institutions, particularly the openness of state institutions (Tarrow, 1989; Kitschelt, 1986), influence the character and success of social movements. The openness of governmental institutions is a dimension of the political opportunity structure which defines how responsive state institutions are to social movements (Eisinger, 1973). This responsiveness has been measured by the separation of powers between branches of governments (Kitschelt, 1986), characteristics of political institutions such as mayor-council governments in cities (Eisinger, 1973) and by the characteristics of electoral politics (Eisinger, 1973; Kitschelt, 1986; and Kriesi, 1990). Because direct democracy is one aspect of the openness of a political system, the literature on political opportunity structure implies that initiatives should help challenging movements and provide them with greater opportunities for success.

However, some empirical studies have found that initiatives do not benefit only unorganized or challenging groups. For example, one study of California initiatives (Lee, 1978) claims that the right to the initiative is most often used by those organizations which control more monetary resources or which also directly lobby the legislature. In Switzerland, App (1987) argues that groups which already have influence in the political system are one of the types of groups more likely to have their initiatives succeed. This evidence suggests that, in fact, organized and powerful groups may benefit more from the initiative than less organized, challenging groups.

This article examines the comparative importance of the initiative in the women's suffrage movements of the United States and Switzerland. In particular, I investigate whether the right of the initiative aids the suffrage movement's development, provides more opportunities to introduce the issue of women's suffrage to the political agenda, and increases the likelihood of women's suffrage movements succeeding in obtaining their goals.

## **II. Women's Suffrage and Direct Democracy**

Although Swiss women were unable to sign initiatives to introduce a women's suffrage amendment, they were entitled to launch an initiative campaign by gathering signatures of male voters for a suffrage amendment. This would have permitted the introduction of a suffrage amendment without requiring the support of the Bundesrat or the Swiss Parliament. Although the obligatory referendum on constitutional amendments made passage of women's suffrage legislation more difficult, the right of constitutional initiative provided an alternative means of introducing the women's suffrage issue to the national agenda.

However, Swiss women's suffrage activists did not perceive the right to the initiative as a useful means of acquiring women's suffrage. In interviews with over



60 women's suffrage activists<sup>2</sup>, very few activists had anything to say about the right to initiate constitutional amendments either on the national or the cantonal level. Most activists interviewed did not mention the initiative when talking about the tactics available to the organization, although many did mention that the required referenda on constitutional amendments hurt the cause of women's suffrage in Switzerland. The use of the initiative was simply not part of the «repertoire» of tactics which the activists viewed as available to them. One suffrage activist even maintained that «We don't have the possibility to launch an initiative ourselves», implying that women did not have the right or ability to do so; she held this view in spite of the fact that other suffrage activists did indeed introduce initiatives.

Nor were the opinions of women suffrage activists in Switzerland changed in hindsight. In recent years other Swiss social movements have made extensive use of the initiative. Even the later women's movement used the initiative to pass the equal rights amendment in 1981. Yet in spite of this, only *one* activist argued that the women's suffrage movement should have utilized the initiative more:

I would have started with initiatives instead of just petitions. Then the first initiative would have been lost, but we would have had a vote. That allows opportunity to explain, the petition disappeared . . . nothing. Then we could have done a second . . . and we would have had more propaganda opportunities.

Thus, while Swiss suffrage activists felt disadvantaged by the obligatory referendum, they did not observe any advantages from the right to initiate cantonal and federal constitutional amendments. Given the debate over the usefulness of the initiative and the attitudes of Swiss suffrage activists we may ask, what is the effect of the initiative on women's suffrage movements?

Unfortunately, it is impossible to judge the effects of the initiative on the national level. True, Switzerland was the last of the industrialized democratic countries to give women the right to vote. Except for Liechtenstein all the countries in Europa had introduced women's suffrage by 1952, with most of the countries giving women the right to vote between 1913 and 1946. The United States also passed a women's suffrage amendment in 1920, more than 50 years before national women's suffrage was introduced in Switzerland and 70 years before every woman in Switzerland could be considered to be fully enfranchised.<sup>3</sup> Switzerland is the only

2 Interviews were conducted with 62 people (61 women and 1 man) from 25 cantons (excluding Jura). Respondents were found using a snowball methodology. Contacts within the Schweizerischer Verband für das Frauenstimmrecht were asked to name the leading suffrage activists in each canton. At each interview, I also asked respondents to name other activists within the canton and in other cantons. For more information on the interview methodology, see Banaszak (1989). With three exceptions, all interviews were conducted in German. All except one were recorded. The quotations included here are translations of the original interviews.

3 Full women's suffrage, where women are entitled to vote in all elections on the same basis as the male population, did not exist in Switzerland until November 26, 1990, when women in Appenzell Innerrhoden were granted the right to participate in cantonal elections by the Swiss Supreme Court.

one of these countries which permits the introduction of national constitutional amendments through the use of initiatives. However, since there is only one case where this direct democratic institution exists on the national level and it is a case which is often hailed for its other exceptional characteristics (Steinberg, 1975), one cannot utilize national comparisons to formulate any conclusions about the effect of the initiative on the success of women's suffrage.

For this reason, I examine the influence of the initiative on the women's suffrage movement by focusing on the passage of women's suffrage on the cantonal and state level in Switzerland and the United States. The same arguments about whether the initiative provides more or less power to challenging groups should be valid on the local level as well. While it is true that no other nation permitted initiatives on women's enfranchisement, some of the states in the United States permitted initiatives for constitutional, and women's suffrage movements in the United States did, in fact, introduce initiatives for women's suffrage on the state level. As a result, we can compare the effect of the initiative on women's suffrage within these two countries by examining its use within states and cantons.

### **1. Initiative Rules in Swiss Cantons and the American States.**

A comparison of initiative rules in Swiss cantons and American states indicates that generally the rules in Switzerland are more open than those in the United States.

Only a few American states allow constitutional amendments to be placed on the ballot through an initiative. During the period of the women's suffrage movement (1869–1920), the right to the initiative for constitutional amendments existed in only 14 states (Ranney, 1978, pp. 70–72). Moreover, Table 1 shows that most states adopted the constitutional initiative only during the last decade of the suffrage movement (Price, 1975; Ranney, 1978). As a result, during the period under study there were only very limited opportunities to utilize the initiative in the United States.

In comparison, the laws in the Swiss cantons concerning the initiative are much more liberal. All of the cantons permit popular initiatives for both constitutional and simple legislative questions (Delley and Auer, 1986). Generally, then, groups can initiate legislation outside of cantonal parliaments in any canton in Switzerland, while only some states in the United States permit initiatives.

In addition, the minimum number of signatures required to validate an initiative is higher in the American states than in Swiss cantons. It is difficult, however, to compare the required number of signatures in the two countries because the legal requirements are written in different mathematical formulae. In Switzerland, the required number of signatures is generally given in an absolute number. For example, Article 121 of the Swiss constitution says that 100000 signatures are needed for a constitutional initiative. On the other hand, initiative requirements in the American states are often based on the number of voters in general elections rather than on an absolute number of signatures. Magleby (1988) notes that

Arizona	1911
Arkansas	1910
California	1911
Colorado	1910
Idaho	1912
Massachusetts	1918
Michigan	1913
Missouri	1908
Nebraska	1912
Nevada	1912
North Dakota	1914
Ohio	1912
Oklahoma	1907
Oregon	1902

*Table 1: States in the United States which permit Constitutional Initiatives and the year that this right was introduced. (Source: *Book of the States*, 1964–1965, p. 14; Mitau, 1966.)*

signature requirements based on absolute numbers in Switzerland create easier ballot access as the population increases over time. On the other hand, percentages based on voter turnout in general elections also have made it easier to achieve the necessary signatures because voter turnout has generally declined in the United States since 1896. As a result, both absolute numbers and percentages of votes cast in elections reduce the difficulties in acquiring the minimum numbers of signatures necessary for an initiative.

However, when the minimum signature requirements of the various Swiss cantons are translated into percentages of eligible voters, they are generally less stringent than those of the American states. Delley and Auer (1986) report that the number of signatures required for a cantonal initiative varies from 12000 in Bern and Vaud to a single signature in several *Landesgemeinde* cantons. If we calculate this as a percentage of eligible voters we find that the canton Vaud, for example, required signatures of less than 4% of the eligible voters in 1980. In general, in those cantons which do not allow initiatives by a single voter, the required number of signatures for an initiative translate into between 3 – 10% of the eligible voters. Moreover, three cantons require only the signature of a single voter to initiate legislation.

In the United States, legislative initiatives generally require between 3 to 10% of the votes cast in the last election for governor. However, the requirements for constitutional initiatives are higher, often calling for between 8 and 15% of the voters in the last election (*Book of States*, 1964–65, p. 14). Ohio has the toughest signature requirements requiring 10% of eligible voters in order to introduce a constitutional initiative. There are no states which permit a single voter to initiate any sort of legislation.

While it is difficult to compare the rules of initiatives between Swiss cantons and American states, three things are clear: 1) there are more Swiss cantons where initiatives are allowed; 2) Swiss citizens may initiate more types of legislation than their American counterparts (that is, constitutional amendments, legislation, and

optional referenda); and 3) signature requirements for initiatives are generally less demanding than in the American states.

## 2. The Initiative and the Women's Suffrage Movement in the United States.

In the United States there were a total of 57 suffrage referenda among 46 states over a period of 50 years (between 1871 and 1920).<sup>4</sup> Despite the large number of referenda in the United States, there were only 8 initiatives introduced in the United States.

One of these initiatives, introduced in Oregon in 1910, called only for partial suffrage (suffrage for white taxpayers). The other seven were for full enfranchisement on the state and local levels. While that seems like very few initiatives, it is important to remember that of the fourteen states which permitted initiatives, only three adopted the right to the initiative before 1910. Therefore for 40 of the 50 years which encompass the American women's suffrage movement, women did not have the opportunity to initiate constitutional amendments.

Moreover, three of fourteen states which permitted use of the initiative had already granted women full voting rights *before* they passed legislation creating the right of citizens to initiate legislation. Thus, women's suffrage activists in only eleven states had the right to the initiative available to them and then only during the last decennium of their struggle. Of the eleven remaining states, women's suffrage activists utilized initiatives in six of them (in Oregon women's suffrage activists launched initiative drives three times within the space of 6 years). Women's suffrage activists were eager to use the newfound right of the initiative. Women's suffrage organizations were among the groups which had lobbied intensively for the right of the initiative (Cronin, 1989). In four states – Arizona, Nebraska, Ohio, and Oklahoma – women's suffrage organizations led initiative drives for the right to vote in the same year or the year following the creation of the initiative legislation. In fact, in Ohio a women's suffrage referendum was the first to be filed under the new right to the initiative (Catt and Shuler, 1926).

But what of those five states where women had the right to initiate legislation but did not do so? What distinguished these five states from the others? Interestingly, these states do not seem to be distinguished by the degree to which the

4 Two states do not require referenda on constitutional amendments, and Hawaii and Alaska did not become states until after women had already received the right to vote.

Moreover, the suffrage movement ended in all states simultaneously in 1920 with the adoption of the Nineteenth Amendment. The national amendment affected state voting laws because while states are allowed to make their own rules regarding elections (Article 1, Section 4 of the U.S. Constitution), Congress is also given the right to alter or proscribe any regulation. This right had been used previously in the Fifteenth Amendment which dictated that states could not abridge state or local voting rights on the basis of race. The Nineteenth Amendment which enfranchised women at the federal level, therefore, forced states to immediately implement women's suffrage. As a result, although every state but two required referenda to alter their constitutions, 17 states enfranchised women without holding any referenda on the question of women's voting rights.

suffrage movements had mobilized in those states. *Table 2* provides a breakdown of the 11 states which permitted initiatives into those states which utilized the initiative and those which did not. Using per capita membership in the women's suffrage organization as an indicator of the degree of mobilization, I find that use of the initiative does not appear to be related to the strength of the women's suffrage movement in the state. In 1910 there was virtually no difference in the per capita size of the National American Women Suffrage Association between those states where initiatives were used and those where it was not. If we examine 1920 membership information, states which did *not* utilize the initiative actually had higher per capita membership than the states where suffrage was introduced by initiative.

State	1910	1920
No Initiative		
Arkansas	0.000	0.570
Massachussetts	0.470	1.300
Michigan	0.050	0.680
North Dakota	0.000	2.320
Nevada	0.000	0.000
Mean	0.104	0.974
With Initiative		
Arizona	0.000	0.000
Missouri	0.030	1.470
Nebraska	0.170	3.090
Ohio	0.180	0.350
Oklahoma	0.060	0.000
Oregon	0.130	0.260
Mean	0.095	0.862

*Table 2:* Membership in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (per 1000 people in the state).

This finding supports the arguments of those who state that initiatives can be utilized by less organized interest groups. United States suffrage organizations which utilized initiatives were less mobilized than those which did not. In Arizona, for example, initiatives for women's suffrage were filed by women in the state even though there was no women's suffrage organization there. Thus, initiatives do appear to be useful to challengers and movements which remain unorganized.

Women's suffrage activists used initiatives when they could not achieve legislation through traditional channels. In Arizona, the state legislature ignored numerous appeals from women to allow voters to decide the suffrage issue. In Missouri and Oklahoma, women's suffrage legislation repeatedly failed to come to a vote in the legislature. In Oregon and Ohio, women's suffrage activists were angry at unfair campaign practices by some business interests (particularly the liquor and



beer industry) and determined to bring women's suffrage up for a second vote (Catt and Shuler, 1926; Moynihan, 1983). In all of these cases, activists perceived that the women's suffrage issue had not been given a fair chance to succeed through the normal channels of politics and the right to the initiative could correct this problem.

On the other hand, those states where women did not use the initiative rights were states where normal channels appeared to be working. In two of the states – Arkansas and Michigan – state legislatures had already granted significant voting rights to women by statute. Moreover, in all of the states, constitutional amendments granting full voting rights for women were presented to the voters at about the same time that the right to the initiative was granted.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, there was little reason for women's suffrage activists to attempt initiatives in these states because state legislatures already had presented women's suffrage referenda to the public.

Thus, the evidence concerning the use of the initiative in the United States tends to support the arguments given by proponents of the initiative. First of all, the initiative allowed challengers to the system a means of putting their ideas on the public agenda. Women's suffrage supporters could use the initiative in those states where state legislatures or organized interest groups denied women the opportunity to introduce women's suffrage legislation. In this sense, the initiative does appear to permit greater access for challengers to the system. Second, the degree of organization does not appear to be important in determining who will use the right to the initiative. In the United States, states where women's suffrage initiatives were filed were no more organized than those where the right to the initiative was not utilized. Women managed to complete initiative drives even in states where the suffrage movement was not organized. This suggests that proponents of the initiative are correct in arguing that these institutions provide greater opportunities to those movements which are not highly mobilized. Thus, evidence from the United States indicates that this direct democratic institution does improve the political opportunity structure for social movements.

### **3. The Initiative and the Women's Suffrage Movement in Switzerland.**

In Switzerland, there were a total of 84 cantonal referenda over women's suffrage held between 1919 and 1990.<sup>6</sup> However, in Switzerland almost a third of the referenda (27 in all) involved only partial suffrage bills. That is, the referenda asked

5 Arkansas had a women's suffrage referendum in 1918 and Nevada successfully passed a constitutional amendment in a referendum in 1914. Two states had two referenda in the period immediately following the introduction of initiative rights: Michigan had referenda in 1913 and 1918 and North Dakota had referenda in 1914 and 1920. Massachusetts is an exception, because its women's suffrage referendum, held in 1915, preceded the introduction of initiative rights by 3 years.

6 This includes all votes on women's suffrage at the Landsgemeinde of Appenzell Innerrhoden, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Glarus, and Niwalden.



whether cantons should allow women to vote for school councils, for church councils, or, most often, for local community officials. In contrast, referenda in the United States almost always involved full women's suffrage because partial suffrage legislation need not be introduced as constitutional amendments and could be enacted by state legislatures. By my calculations, only 57 referenda involved significant voting rights for women at the cantonal level.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty one of these women's suffrage referenda were introduced by initiative, including 3 initiatives (one in Glarus, one in Appenzell Innerrhoden and one in Uri) in cantons where only one person is required to file an initiative. Of those 21 initiatives, 5 of them called for partial suffrage legislation (that is, either a constitutional amendment allowing communities to introduce their own suffrage legislation or initiatives calling for school or church suffrage). In spite of the fact that initiatives were permitted throughout the nation, initiatives calling for full or partial voting rights for women were only introduced in 13 cantons. Thus, in half of the Swiss cantons initiatives for women's suffrage were never attempted.

The lack of initiative drives in these cantons cannot be explained by overwhelming support for women's suffrage among their cantonal governments. In fact, on average these cantons were very similar to the cantons where initiatives were introduced. Of the twelve cantons which never utilized the initiative, only four granted women the right to vote prior to the passage of the national referendum in 1971. However, 5 of the thirteen cantons with initiatives introduced women's suffrage prior to 1971.<sup>8</sup> Thus, cantons where there were initiatives were no more or less likely to have achieved women's suffrage prior to the national amendment in 1971.

Other comparisons provide similar results. If one examines the legislative history of women's suffrage prior to the acceptance of the national amendment in 1971, one finds a number of cantons which had never considered any legislation giving women the right to vote in cantonal elections. However, initiatives were no more or less likely to be introduced in cantons with no prior cantonal suffrage referenda. Of the thirteen cantons which did utilize the initiative, five of them did not vote on granting women the right to vote in cantonal elections until 1971. Similarly, 5 of the 12 cantons where no initiatives were ever introduced also had no history of cantonal women's suffrage referenda prior to 1971. Thus, while the American suffrage activists were moved to utilize initiatives where governments did not respond to their demands, the use of the initiative in Switzerland was unrelated to the willingness of cantonal governments to consider women's suffrage.

Although initiatives were introduced in relatively unmobilized states in the United States, organization played a larger role in determining where women's suffrage initiatives were introduced in Switzerland. Cantons where mobilization was stronger (that is, where a larger proportion of the population joined the women's

7 Women in Switzerland did end up fighting in many more referenda, but this was largely because receiving even partial voting rights necessitated a cantonal referendum.

8 Because women in the canton Jura gained the right to vote while Jura was still a part of the canton Bern, I do not include it as a separate canton in this analysis.

suffrage organization) were more likely to introduce initiatives for women's suffrage. Overall, cantons which introduced initiatives had about 1 member in the women's suffrage organization for every 1000 people in the canton. Cantons where no initiatives had been filed had only about 1 member in suffrage organizations for every 1500 people in the population. Thus, in direct contrast to the American findings, mobilization in Switzerland appears to make a difference.

The truth, however, is somewhat more complex because the division of cantons into those with initiatives and those without ignores the question of who is sponsoring the initiative. A large majority of the women's suffrage initiatives in Switzerland were not launched by women's suffrage organizations. In fact, only four initiatives were run by women's suffrage organizations during the entire 70 year period of the suffrage movement in Switzerland. Two of these initiatives were run by the women's suffrage organization in Geneva in 1920 and 1940. The suffrage organization in Basel-Stadt also initiated the constitutional amendment which gave them cantonal suffrage in 1966. And the women's suffrage organization in Bern sponsored an initiative in 1956 to bring an optional community suffrage bill to a vote.

All other initiatives were introduced by political parties or by other social movement organizations (see *Table 3*). In fact, women's suffrage activists were not always totally supportive of the women's suffrage initiatives introduced by these groups. In Zürich, for example, many people were unhappy that the women's suffrage initiatives of 1947 and 1954 were launched by the Communist Party (the *Partei der Arbeit* or PdA). Many women's groups which had previously supported women's suffrage withdrew their support on both of the initiatives sponsored by the PdA. Although the initiatives were officially supported by the women's suffrage organization in Zürich, not all members agreed that they should support the initiative, even though it was exactly the type of legislation that they had been demanding. In Schaffhausen, activists complained about the introduction of an initiative in 1969. As one activist said:

It was a bit too much, naturally, to have it [a referendum on women's suffrage] again so soon, after only two years... In 1969, we already had to begin to prepare for the national suffrage referendum in 1971... So we said, stop, and that is also why the results are worse in 1969.

Amazingly, then, women's suffrage organizations were not always even appreciative allies when other groups did the work of sponsoring the initiative.

The organizations which launched women's suffrage initiatives were generally opposition groups within the canton. Of the initiatives launched by identifiable groups other than the women's suffrage organization (13 in all), eleven were sponsored by opposition political parties or youth organizations. The opposition political parties were generally parties of the left; the PdA in particular was responsible for a number of the initiatives. The other main impetus for suffrage came from youth organizations of the various parties. Often these organizations sponsored the suffrage organization without support from the cantonal party. For example, one activist in Tessin noted that the initiative managed by the combined

	Year	Sponsor
<b>Cantonal Suffrage Initiatives</b>		
<i>Canton</i>		
Appenzell Ausserrhoden	1976	LdU
Appenzell Ausserrhoden	1984	SP
Appenzell Innerrhoden	1973	Gruppe für Innerrhoden
Basel-Stadt	1966	SVF*
Genève	1921	SVF*
Genève	1940	SVF*
Genève	1946	PdA
Glarus	1921	60 individuals
Luzern	1970	Kath.-Konservative
St. Gallen	1972	Young CVP
Schaffhausen	1969	Young SP
Schwyz	1971	Jungkonservative Bewegung
Tessin	1966	Youth orgs. of 4 parties
Uri	1972	100 individuals
Zürich	1947	PdA
Zürich	1954	PdA
<b>Partial Suffrage Initiatives</b>		
Appenzell Innerrhoden	1969	single individual
Appenzell Innerrhoden	1970	Youth organization
Bern	1968	SVF*
Glarus	1961	Allgemeine Bürgerliche Partei
Glarus	1967	single individual
* Schweizerischer Verband für das Frauenstimmrecht		

Table 3: Swiss Initiatives for Women's Suffrage and their Sponsors

effort of the youth organizations of the four major parties «was not supported by the political parties. They [the party organizations] said that the young people should not go over their heads.» Thus, most of the non-suffrage organizations which initiated women's suffrage legislation were groups with little formal power in the cantonal governments. Those groups were mainly opposition political parties and youth organizations which had little power within the political parties.

The relationship between the mobilization of the women's suffrage movement and the introduction of initiatives seems to be affected by who sponsored the initiative. In fact, as Table 4 indicates, women's suffrage organization (again measured by per capita suffrage organization membership) were weaker where other groups introduced initiatives for women's suffrage and were stronger in cantons where no initiatives occurred at all. The previously mentioned difference between cantons with and without suffrage initiatives is created by those 3 cantons where women's suffrage initiatives were introduced by the suffrage organizations themselves. In these cantons, the suffrage organizations are, on average, four times as large as the organizations in cantons where no suffrage initiatives were introduced and five times as large as those in cantons where other groups ran the initiatives. Thus, women's suffrage organizations which introduced their own initiatives are

stronger than those in other cantons, but suffrage organizations are weakest where initiatives are introduced for them.

Canton	1959	1969
<b>No Initiative Introduced</b>		
Aargau	0.06	0.49
Baselland	0.74	1.15
Fribourg	0.38	0.57
Graubünden	0.00	0.00
Neuchâtel	1.96	1.35
Nidwalden	0.00	0.00
Obwalden	0.00	0.00
Solothurn	0.48	0.57
Thurgau	0.05	0.85
Vaud	3.09	2.13
Vallis	0.94	0.64
Zug	0.00	0.00
Mean	0.64	0.65
<b>Initiative from Women's Organization</b>		
Bern	1.52	1.50
Baselstadt	4.57	4.27
Genève	1.59	0.88
Mean	2.56	2.22
<b>Initiative from Other Organizations</b>		
Ausserrhoden	0.00	0.00
Glarus	0.00	0.00
Innerrhoden	0.00	0.00
Luzern	0.30	0.65
St. Gallen	0.21	0.28
Schaffhausen	2.20	3.81
Schwyz	0.00	0.00
Tessin	1.50	1.02
Uri	0.00	0.00
Zürich	0.71	1.07
Mean	0.49	0.68
Mean of All Cantons with Initiatives	0.97	1.04

Table 4: Membership in the Schweizerischer Verband für das Frauenstimmrecht (per 1000 people in the canton)

While the use of the initiative in the United States supports the argument that it provides greater access to less organized groups, the results in Switzerland are mixed. First, while there are many more initiatives to introduce full or partial women's suffrage, very few of these are sponsored by women's suffrage organizations. In fact, women's suffrage organizations in the U.S. introduced more initia-

tives than their Swiss counterparts although they had fewer opportunities to do so. Second, only the highly mobilized Swiss suffrage organizations introduced any initiatives. Finally, the other groups which sponsor women's suffrage initiatives are usually groups without power in the cantons and they tend to launch these initiatives in cantons where the suffrage organizations are very weak.

All in all, these results paint a different picture of the relationship between social movements and the right to the initiative than we see in the American case. The existence and greater openness of this direct democratic institution does not necessarily imply its use by social movements. When Swiss suffrage movements do use the initiative, it is only used by the strongest suffrage organizations. The Swiss findings appear to refute both the proponents of the initiative who argue that this institution provides power to unorganized groups and the literature on political opportunity structure which claims that openness in formal political institutions should provide social movements with more opportunities for success. In Switzerland, the women's suffrage movement did not avail itself to these opportunities.

### **III. The Initiative and the Success of the Women's Suffrage Movement.**

Before we discuss the reasons why direct democracy should be so different in Switzerland and the United States, it is worthwhile to consider the relationship between the timing of suffrage and the use of the initiative and referenda. In particular, if the use of the initiative is not an effective means for social movements to institute social change, then the question of whether women's suffrage activists actually employed the initiative becomes moot. If suffrage activists cannot actually achieve their goals through the initiative, there is no reason to expect them to utilize this direct democratic institution. Initiatives no longer become a reasonable tactic for groups to employ if they are serious about bringing about the changes they profess. Thus, we must ask: Does using the initiative as a tactic help bring suffrage about more quickly?

In Switzerland, such an analysis produces results which are very similar to the discussion of women's suffrage organizational membership and the initiative. As *Table 5* shows, the cantons where women's suffrage organizations utilized initiatives were among the first cantons to achieve women's voting rights. On average, these cantons granted full voting rights to women a full three years before the cantons where no initiative was introduced. On the other hand, women were enfranchised last in those cantons where other groups introduced initiatives. The average year for the achievement of women's suffrage for these cantons is 1975, a full five years after the passage of the national women's suffrage amendment. Even after removing the two Appenzells from this calculation as outliers, the average year of introduction is still only 1971. It is not simply the introduction of initiatives that speeds the passage of women's suffrage legislation, then. Rather, women's suffrage organization must instigate the initiative for success to come more quick-



ly. One cannot therefore conclude unequivocally that the use of initiatives in Switzerland increases the success of a social movement.

Canton	Yr. Full Suffrage Passed
No Initiative Introduced	
Aargau	1971
Baselland	1968
Fribourg	1971
Graubünden	1972
Neuchâtel	1959
Nidwalden	1972
Obwalden	1972
Solothurn	1971
Thurgau	1971
Vaud	1959
Vallis	1970
Zug	1971
Mean	1969
Initiative from Women's Organization	
Bern	1971
Baselstadt	1966
Genève	1960
Mean	1966
Initiative from Other Organizations	
Ausserrhoden	1989
Glarus	1971
Innerrhoden	1990
Luzern	1970
St. Gallen	1972
Schaffhausen	1971
Schwyz	1972
Tessin	1969
Uri	1972
Zürich	1970
Mean	1975
Mean of All Cantons with Initiatives	1973

Table 5: Use of the Initiative and the Passage of Full Women's Voting Rights within the Canton

In the United States use of the initiative does not bring about the early enfranchisement of women. Of the 11 states which had not passed suffrage prior to granting the right to initiative, there was no difference in the timing of suffrage between those states where suffrage organizations used the initiative and those states where they did not. On average, both groups of states granted women the right to vote in 1917, two years before the federal amendment was passed. However, as I suggested



above, American women's suffrage activists sponsored initiatives when state governments did not introduce women's suffrage referenda on their own accord. Thus, those states which did not use the initiative may not have needed it.

A second possibility is that the existence of the right to the initiative may force the government to act on the demands of challenging groups even before they initiate legislation. If the initiative itself permits greater power to social movements even where it is not utilized, one would also expect that states with the right to initiative had introduced women's suffrage earlier than those where no initiatives could be introduced. However, we find almost no differences between states which permit the initiative (average passage 1917) and states which do not (average passage 1916).<sup>9</sup> On the whole, this difference (which is slightly less than one year) is not particularly significant. Thus, the existence of initiative rights does not really increase the effectiveness of the American women's suffrage movement.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

We are left with two questions about the importance of the initiative for the Swiss and American women's suffrage movements.

##### **1. Is the right to initiate legislation important to social movements?**

First of all, the ability to use the initiative and its actual use does not increase the success of American women's suffrage movements. True, these data show that initiatives allow smaller, less organized movements to introduce suffrage amendments on their own, particularly when governments are unresponsive to group demands. However, in the final analysis, movements which use initiatives are no more successful in achieving suffrage legislation than those which do not use them. Why is it that this direct democratic institution appears so unimportant to the success of the American women's suffrage movement?

The answer to this question lies most probably in the constellation of other factors which affected the suffrage movement. It is possible that a suffrage organization could compensate for the lack of initiative rights by directing their energies and tactics in another direction. Both the national and the state suffrage organizations in the United States took advantage of other characteristics of the political opportunity structure. In particular, astute leaders of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, such as Carrie Chapman Catt, profited from the competition between political parties by utilizing lobbying and electoral tactics which played the parties off one another (Banaszak, 1989 and 1990).

According to this analysis of the American suffrage movement, the arguments of

<sup>9</sup> This difference can be explained by the exceptional state, Wyoming, which introduced women's suffrage while still a territory in 1869. When Wyoming is excluded from the analysis, the average year of introduction is 1918, one year after states with the initiative.

proponents of the initiative must be qualified. The right to the initiative did provide an additional opportunity for suffrage movements to introduce legislation into the system. But having one's policies considered and achieving real change are two very different goals. This analysis shows that 1) the opportunity to introduce initiatives does not necessarily lead to quicker passage of women's suffrage legislation and 2) the American suffrage movement found other tactics to compensate for the lack of initiative. Thus, this direct democratic institution may not be as important to challengers as its proponents suggest.

The effect of initiatives on the American women's suffrage movement also implies that openness of political institutions need not be important to the development and success of social movements. However, the concept of «political opportunity structure» includes other aspects in addition to the openness of political institutions, including the existence of allies. It is likely that some aspects of the political opportunity structure may be more significant in facilitating social movements than others. For the American women's suffrage movement, then, the right to the initiative, an important component of the openness of the political system, may simply be less significant than another aspect of political opportunity structure – the structure of alliances.

Alternatively, movements may be able to compensate for or react to the existing structure of political opportunities. This means that state suffrage movements could compensate for the lack of initiative rights by emphasizing other tactics, such as the lobbying. According to such a theory, no dimension of the structure of political opportunities is more important than another; organizations will be as successful as possible under any constellation of opportunities because they will alter their tactics to fit the context. In the U.S. case, the political opportunity structure offered alternative advantages (such as the strong party competition) which allowed suffrage movements in states without the initiative to be just as successful as in those with initiative rights.

## **2. The Use of Initiatives by Swiss Women's Suffrage Organizations.**

Initiatives appear unimportant in the American context, but they do have a significant impact on the Swiss women's suffrage movements. In cantons where women's suffrage movements introduced their own initiatives, women received the right to vote earlier than their counterparts in cantons where other organizations ran initiative drives or where no initiatives were introduced. In addition, only highly mobilized suffrage organizations managed to launch initiative drives.

Thus, this analysis confirms those authors who argue that the initiative is most useful to organized groups which are already powerful in their own right (Lee, 1978 and App, 1987). Less organized suffrage movements were not helped by the existence of initiative rights; only highly mobilized groups managed to utilize the initiative at all. In this sense, critiques of other Swiss direct democratic institutions by authors such as Neidhart (1970) and Tschäni (1987) may also be applicable to the initiative as well. Perhaps only powerful, organized interests can take full

advantage of the right to the initiative. Yet, the results of the Swiss analysis contradict the findings from the United States where the initiative was an instrument for the unorganized. Why do the two analyses come to opposite conclusions?

The Swiss analysis also raises another question. If utilizing the initiative did help enfranchise women quicker, why didn't other cantonal women's suffrage organizations launch initiatives as well and why was the tactic never utilized on the federal level?

To answer this question, I believe we must examine the context in which the initiative is used. More specifically, we must explore the other elements of the political opportunity structure. In America, other aspects of the political opportunity structure made it easier to use initiatives. Even in states where the suffrage movement was weak, the Prohibition movement and the Progressive movement encouraged women to use this tactic (Kraditor, 1981). In addition, the existence of women's suffrage bills in state legislatures clearly indicated whether state governments were responding to the demands for suffrage. Suffrage activists used the initiative to put unresponsive state governments in motion. Finally, on the national level and in many (but not all) states, there was fierce competition between parties for votes. All of the women's suffrage organizations (regardless of their size) reacted to this competition by creating organizations based on electoral politics. It was relatively easy to adapt these organizations which were designed to mobilize voters into organizations which collected signatures of eligible voters for a women's suffrage initiative.

On the other hand, many of the other aspects of the political opportunity structure in Switzerland made it more arduous for suffrage movements to initiate legislation. First, Swiss women's suffrage movements did not receive the same sort of support from other movements. While the worker's movement in the 1920's was one of the first groups to support women's suffrage, the support was mainly ideological and did not translate into concrete alliances between the two movements. A majority of the suffrage movement activists were unwilling to develop strong connections with the worker's movement because they came from groups which opposed the worker's movement.<sup>10</sup> In addition, there were connections between the suffrage movement and the prohibition movement in Switzerland (Woodtli, 1983). However this movement was not as strong as the American prohibition movement and therefore these connections were not as helpful in advancing the suffrage movement. Finally, the development of new social movements in the late sixties, particularly the development of the new women's movement (the *Frauenbefreiungsbewegung* or FBB), provided a new source of support for women's enfranchisement. However, with a few exceptions these new movements did not provide significant support for the established suffrage movement.

10 For example, Ruckstuhl (1986) describes how the President of the *Schweizerischer Verband für das Frauenstimmrecht* sent a telegram to the *Bundesrat* during the General Strike of 1918 supporting their actions against the strike; at the same time the President noted that women's suffrage was among the worker's demands.

Thus, the Swiss suffrage movement suffered from a lack of support from other movements which might have assisted the less organized or unorganized movement in running initiatives.

Moreover, differences in the legislative process made it difficult for the movement to distinguish indifference to the cause from rejection of the cause. In the U.S., legislation introduced had to be handled within that legislative session. In contrast, petitions to cantonal governments and motions from cantonal parliaments for women's suffrage often seemed to disappear. Because the legislative process moved slower, Swiss suffrage activists were often uncertain if the cantonal and national governments were in the process of creating appropriate legislation or ignoring the motions and petitions altogether. Since the activists were often affiliated (either formally or informally) with the parties which headed these cantonal governments, they were loath to challenge the government with initiatives.

Finally, party competition was weak in most cantons and nonexistent in many. The process of collegiality and consensus decision-making (Steiner, 1974) meant that only a few parties did not participate in governmental decisions. As a result, political parties were not important determinants of support for suffrage and it made little sense for suffrage activists to organize along electoral lines. The result was twofold. First, suffrage organizations did not have the organization geared toward eligible voters which added considerable costs to running initiative drives. Second, suffrage organizations had few connections to party organizations which also might have aided organizations in launching their own initiatives. As a result, only those cantonal movements which were already strong were able to manage initiatives.

Thus, the differences between the American and Swiss women's suffrage movements and the lack of initiatives by the Swiss suffrage movements can both be explained by referring to other characteristics of the Swiss and American political systems. Political scientists should not attempt to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the initiative and the referendum without giving some thought to the political context in which they occur. The results of this analysis show that the initiative can have very different effects on the same social movement in different countries. Similarly, we cannot discuss the use of the initiative by the Swiss women's suffrage movement without considering other aspects of the political opportunity structure. While it might be easiest to «blame» the suffrage movement for choosing the wrong tactics, there are many other intervening variables which may have affected the suffrage movement's choice of tactics. The Swiss women's suffrage movement may have made the best possible choices given the structure of opportunities in which they operated.

This analysis also suggests that care should be taken in the development of the concept of the political opportunity structure. Currently, much of the scholarship on the political opportunity structure tries to break the concept of the political opportunity structure into its component parts (Tarrow, 1989; Kriesi, 1990), and studies each component independently (Eisinger, 1973). This analysis implies that the various dimensions of the political opportunity structure do not operate independently. The effect of openness of political institutions may depend on many



factors such as the structure of alliances. The relationship of the various dimensions of the political opportunity structure is in fact complex and interdependent.

## Bibliography

- App, Rolf, 1987. «Initiativen und ihre Wirkungen auf Bundesebene seit 1974», *Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Politische Wissenschaft*, Vol. 27, pp. 180–206.
- Banaszak, Lee Ann, 1990. «Federalism and the Tactics of the Swiss and American Women's Suffrage Movements: How State Institutions Affect Political Movements». A Paper presented at the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting held in San Francisco, August 30 – September 2, 1990.
- Banaszak, Lee Ann, 1989. *A Comparative Analysis of Mobilization Outcomes: The Case of the Swiss and American Women's Suffrage Movement*. Ph.D. Dissertation: Washington University, St. Louis.
- Catt, Carrie Chapman and Shuler, Nettie Rogers. 1926. *Woman Suffrage and Politics: The Inner Story of the Suffrage Movement*. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York.
- Cronin, Thomas E., 1989. *Direct Democracy: The Politics of Initiative Referendum, and Recall*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Delley, Jean-Daniel and Auer, Andreas, 1986. «Structures politiques des cantons» in *Handbuch Politisches System der Schweiz, Band 3: Föderalismus*. Paul Haupt; Bern.
- Eisinger, Peter, 1973. «The Condition of Protest Behavior in American Cities», *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1, pp. 11–28.
- Government and Politics* special issue on «Can the Confederation Helvetica be Imitated?», Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1988).
- Hertig, Hans Peter, 1984. «Volksabstimmungen» in *Handbuch Politisches System der Schweiz, Band 2: Strukturen und Prozesse*. Paul Haupt; Bern.
- Kerr, Henry, 1987. «The Swiss Party System: Steadfast and Changing» in Daalder, Hans, ed., *Party Systems in Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium*. St. Martin's Press: New York.
- Kitschelt, Herbert P., 1986. «Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies», *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 16, pp. 57–85.
- Kraditor, Aileen S., 1981. *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement: 1890–1920*. W. W. Norton: New York.
- Kriesi, Hanspeter, 1990. «The Political Opportunity Structure of New Social Movements: Its Impact on Their Development». A paper prepared for the Workshop on «Social Movements, Counterforces and Public Bystanders», WZB, Berlin, July 5–7, 1990.
- Lee, Eugene C., 1978. «California» in *Referendums*, Butler, David and Ranney, Austin, eds. American Enterprise Institute: Washington D.C.
- Linder, Wolf, 1987. *Politische Entscheidung und Gesetzesvollzug in der Schweiz*. Paul Haupt: Bern.
- Magleby, David B., 1988. «Taking the Initiative: Direct Legislation and Direct Democracy in the 1980s», *PS*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer), p. 600–611.
- McAdam, Doug, 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. University of Chicago, Chicago.
- Mitau, G. Theodore, 1966. *State and Local Government: Politics and Processes*. Charles Scribner's Sons; New York.
- Moynihan, Ruth Barnes, 1983. *Rebel for Rights: Abigail Scott Duniway*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
- Neidhardt, L., 1970. *Plebiszit und Pluralitäre Demokratie: Eine Analyse der Funktion des schweizerischen Gesetzesreferendums*. Berne: Francke Verlag.
- Price, Charles M., 1975. «The Initiative: A Comparative State Analysis and Reassessment of a Western Phenomenon», *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 28 (June 1975), pp. 243–262.
- Ranney, Austin, 1978. «The United States of America» in Butler, David and Ranney, Austin, eds.,

- Referendums: A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory*. American Enterprise Institute: Washington D.C.
- Ruckstuhl, Lotti, 1986. *Frauen sprengen Fesseln. Hindernislauf zum Frauenstimmrecht in der Schweiz*. Bonstetten.
- Schmidt, David D., 1989. *Citizen Lawmakers: The Ballot Initiative Revolution*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
- Steinberg, Jonathan, 1975. *Why Switzerland?* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Steiner, Jürg, 1981, in Ranney, Austin, ed. *The Referendum Device*. American Enterprise Institute: Washington D.C.
- Steiner, Jürg, 1974. *Amicable Agreement versus Majority Rule: Conflict Resolution in Switzerland*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill.
- Tarrow, Sidney, 1983. *Struggle, Politics, and Reform: Collective Action, Social Movements, and Cycles of Protest*. Western Societies Program, Occasional Paper No. 21. Cornell University: Ithaca, NY.
- Tarrow, Sidney, 1988. «National Politics and Collective Action: Recent Theory and Research in Western Europe and the United States», *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 14, pp. 421–40.
- Tschäni, Hans, 1987. *Wer regiert die Schweiz?* R. Piper: München.
- Tilly, Charles, 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley: Reading, MA.
- Woodtli, Susanna, 1983. *Gleichberechtigung: Der Kampf um die politischen Rechte der Frau in der Schweiz*. 2nd. ed. Verlag Huber: Frauenfeld.



