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Mara Labud, Kymani Koelewijn, Gianluca Sorrentino, Robin Gut, Jonas Wüthrich

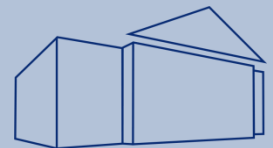
The World of Referendums

2025 Edition

An overview of popular votes in 2025

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Bezugsadresse:

Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau (ZDA)

Villa Blumenhalde, Küttigerstrasse 21

5000 Aarau

Telefon +41 62 836 94 44

E-Mail info@zdaarau.ch

www.zdaarau.ch

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Preface

We are pleased to present the World of Referendums – 2025 Edition report (WoR 2025). It is the third such report compiled by our team at the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA) at the University of Zurich, Switzerland.

The report is based on data contained in the unique Referendum Database (RDB), the most comprehensive collection of popular votes worldwide. We define referendums as instances of “(...) [a] popular vote on an issue of policy that is organized by the state or at least by a state-like entity, such as the authorities of a de facto state” (Mendez and Germann 2016, 144). So defined, the referendum includes both votes on government proposals as well as citizens’ initiatives. As of 2025, the RDB contains information on more than 3,000 referendums at the national level and 15,000 referendums at the subnational level in over 200 countries and territories worldwide since 1791. For Switzerland alone, the Referendum Database contains data on around 700 national referendums since 1793, and around 7,000 cantonal referendums since 1970. To this, we have newly added and analyzed an additional 5,000 cantonal referendums between 1831 and 1970.

This iteration of the World of Referendums report provides a descriptive overview of popular votes at the national level worldwide, and at the national and cantonal level for Switzerland in 2025. It builds on and expands the insights from our two previous yearly reports. In the WoR 2023 (Brüggemann et al. 2023), we analyzed referendum trends at the national level worldwide, see (Freiburghaus and Vatter 2026) for a contextualization. In the WoR 2024 (Ezzaini et al. 2024), we went into more detail on Switzerland as the world champion of direct democracy, comparing referendums at the national and at the cantonal level.

From 2025 onwards, our goal is to provide a yearly overview of referendum events and trends, and to highlight particular points of interest that our team has identified. As a word of caution, we would like to remind the reader that this is a largely atheoretical data report. The data presented may reveal many interesting patterns and further avenues for future analyses based on theories and concepts from democracy studies, institutionalism, and comparative public policy.

This report has been thoroughly compiled and checked by the authors. Any mistakes that remain are our own. We are aware that the Referendum Database may contain inconsistencies or missing events. This is why we are grateful for your critical feedback via e-mail to feedback@rdb.vote.

1 Introduction

In 2025, nine countries and one territory held a total of 30 referendums at the national level. While most of these votes were held on specific national issues, some were also influenced by larger geostrategic events. The ongoing war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine helped shape the unofficial “Voks 2025” consultation in Hungary, aimed at impeding the bid for the accession of Ukraine to the European Union. The consultation was called by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban to support his negotiation stance within the European Union. The consultation was conducted online and through paper ballot without a legal basis and the results could not be independently verified. Allegedly, around a third of the Hungarian electorate participated in the consultation, with 95% of participants voting against Ukraine joining the EU (Fumagalli 2025; Ishikawa and Roginer-Hofmeister 2025; Verseck 2025).

Military coups and political instability across Central and Western Africa and the Sahel Region also had ramifications in the world of referendums. Because of the high incidence of military coups in recent years, this area has been termed the “coup-belt”. Since 2020, military coups have taken place in Mali, Niger, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Gabon, Guinea Bissau and the DR Congo (Engels 2025, 19; Habtom and Waller 2025; Ola 2026, 4–5). In this “coup-belt”, the finding that the “military is more prone than civilian dictators to convoke plebiscites” (Penadés and Velasco 2022, 75) seems to be corroborated. The military regimes in Mali and Chad had entrenched their rule through constitutional referendums in 2023, the military regime in Gabon in 2024. In 2025, it was Guinea’s turn, which voted on a new draft constitution put forward by the ruling military junta to allow military leaders to continue their rule (Referendum Database 2026). The new constitution passed with an approval rate of around 90%. The vote took place on an uneven playing field with severe restrictions on the media, and amidst boycotts by opposition groups (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2025; Le Monde 2025).

In the Americas, the United States under President Donald Trump re-asserted its dominance in Latin America with a new national security strategy released in November 2025. Reminiscent of the “Monroe Doctrine”, the strategy calls for, amongst other things, the United States to “establish and expand access in strategically important locations” in the Western Hemisphere (Ali, Spetalnick, and Mackenzie 2025; The White House 2025, 16; Tribelhorn 2026). This strategy seems to have received a minor setback in Ecuador in November, when 60% of participating voters rejected the return of US military bases in a referendum. The vote took place in the wake of a tour of the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security at the time, Kristi Noem, to Ecuador, in which she met with President Daniel Noboa to promote a renewed military presence in the country (Ludwig 2025; Wells 2025).

Apart from these referendums with geostrategic implications, popular votes were held on other issues as well in 2025. In Europe, Slovenia held two referendums, one on pension supplements for artists, the other about allowing assisted suicide. Italy held five abrogative referendums on labor legislation and the acquisition of Italian citizenship. Switzerland held five referendums on a range of issues: restructuring the economy to achieve ecological sustainability, reforming owner-occupied housing, introducing electronic identity services, introducing compulsory service for the benefit society, and introducing an inheritance tax on large fortunes.

In the Americas, Ecuador held three additional referendums on reducing the number of national assembly members, removing the obligation of permanent state funding for national parties, and on whether to draft a new constitution. In the British Overseas Territory of the Cayman Islands, the population voted on three referendums on the construction of a harbor to host cruise ships, introducing a national lottery, and decriminalizing cannabis.

In the Asia-Pacific region, three countries held a total of nine referendums. Taiwan held one referendum about the re-opening of a nuclear power plant. The Marshall Islands held seven referendums on constitutional amendments concerning the tightening of citizenship requirements, re-organizing the upper house, granting jurisdiction to a traditional rights court, establishing an ombudsperson to investigate corruption, amending the requirements to run for parliament, and reorganizing electoral districts. Lastly, Nauru held a constitutional referendum about extending the legislative term.

These referendums at the national level were complemented by a multitude of referendums at the subnational level. In Switzerland alone, close to 100 referendums took place at the cantonal level, with the canton of Geneva alone holding 15 referendums. The Swiss cantons have a strong position within the Swiss federal system (Vatter 2002) and allow votes on a broader range of issues than the national level permits (Auer 2016). In 2025, three main referendum topic areas emerge: state organization, social policy, and economic policy. In terms of economic policy, the main focus was on infrastructure projects, regional economic development and fiscal changes. At the same time, discussions about the minimum wage, tenancy laws and government funding for social assistance and childcare influenced the social policy agenda. Additionally, the cantons negotiated their own institutional frameworks by proposing changes to the constitutional grounding of core digital rights and the voting age of 16. Still, the ability of the electorate to debate nearly any aspect of public life is a defining feature of cantonal direct democracy. Projects like the constitutional initiative “For the preservation of Lake Gruyère and its shores” in the canton of Fribourg (ILFD 2025) or the cantonal popular initiative “Let the Ptarmigan and the Mountain Hare Live!” in Uri (Kanton Uri 2024) serve as examples of this variation.

It thus seems that direct democracy was alive and well in 2025, with ramifications both at a geostrategic and everyday political level. In this World of Referendums report, we delve into more detail on popular votes in 2025. The WoR 2025 is structured as follows: In the second chapter, we summarize national-level referendums in 2025 and compare their outcome and turnout. In the third chapter, we analyze Swiss cantonal referendums in 2025 in more detail. We compare and contrast Swiss cantonal referendums and discuss patterns of frequency, outcome, turnout, and the topics voted on. In the fourth chapter, we analyze newly added data on more than 5,000 cantonal referendums prior to 1970. In the conclusion, we discuss the most relevant patterns and trends that we have identified for 2025.

2 National referendums in 2025

2.1 Overview of national referendums

Table 2.1: Worldwide national referendums in 2025 compared to the 10-year-average

	2025		10 year average ¹	
	Ballot dates	Referendums	Ballot dates	Referendums
Global	13	30	18.2	42.3
Switzerland	3	5	3.0	8.7
Slovenia	2	2	0.6	1.1
Cayman Islands ²	1	3	-	-
Ecuador	1	4	0.5	2.8
Guinea	1	1	0.1	0.1
Hungary	1	1	0.2	0.5
Italy	1	5	0.4	0.8
Marshall Islands	1	7	-	-
Nauru ³	1	1	-	-
Taiwan	1	1	0.3	1.5

¹Time period: 2015 - 2024

²First referendums held since 2012

³First referendum held since 2010

Sorted by ballot dates, then alphabetically. Data Source: Referendum Database.

As shown in Table 2.1, in 2025 less referendums were held than on average from 2015 to 2024. Switzerland held less referendums than usual and Italy more.

Switzerland

Across three national ballot dates in 2025, Switzerland's federal system of direct democracy was put into practice, with eligible voters deciding on a range of political initiatives. The three national votes included five federal propositions, consisting of mandatory and optional referendums, as well as citizen initiatives. The first national ballot date was the 9th February 2025, when voters decided on the so-called Environmental Responsibility Initiative ("For a responsible economy within planetary boundaries"). By limiting resource usage and environmental damages to a level that is globally sustainable, this initiative aimed to introduce in the Federal Constitution the idea that Switzerland's economy and consumption habits must stay within planetary bounds ([Swissvotes 2025d](#)). In order to attain ecological sustainability, the concept called for extensive structural changes to be made within ten years, which made it extremely ambitious. The initiative was decisively rejected by the voters, with only 30% of voters supporting it. The initiative was also rejected in every canton. This result indicates that drastic ecological restructuring typically faces strong opposition in Switzerland if it lacks clear and practical implementation methods.

The second major ballot date took place on 28th September 2025, when two federal proposals were put to a vote ([The Federal Council 2025a](#)). The first was a mandatory referendum on a federal law that changed the way owner-occupied housing taxes were paid, namely eliminating the imputed rental value (*Eigenmietwert*) and introducing a new framework that allowed cantons to impose additional taxes on second houses. With roughly 57.7% of voters in favour, this plan was approved by a decisive majority. The outcome ended the long political battle over the imputed rental value and was a major political win for those advocating for homeowner tax relief ([Swissvotes 2025b](#)). At the same time, voters decided on the Federal Act on Electronic Identity Services (E-ID Act) in the context of an optional referendum. As a more secure option to private solutions, this idea called for the implementation of a national electronic identity system, a digital

form of identification that would be supervised by the government. The revised model was approved by a majority of around 50.4% of voters, after a previous E-ID proposal had been rejected in 2021 ([Swissvotes 2021](#)). Concerns about democratic accountability, data privacy, and the proper distribution of governmental responsibilities were raised by the previous framework, which called for the delegation of essential services to private companies. The newly adopted model, by contrast, establishes a predominantly state-operated system, thereby responding to concerns raised in the earlier referendum. The sharply split outcome illustrates how divisive the discussion of digital fundamental rights and the government's role in governing digital identities in Switzerland has remained ([SRF 4 News 2025a](#)).

The third and final national ballot date of the year took place on 30th November 2025. On this date, two popular initiatives were submitted to the electorate ([The Federal Council 2025b](#)), both of which were rejected strongly ([Bundeskanzlei 2025](#)). The first was the Service Citizen Initiative ("For a committed Switzerland"), which proposed the introduction of a compulsory service obligation for Swiss citizens beyond the existing compulsory military service for men according to article 59 of the Federal Constitution. The goal was to increase societal readiness for emergencies and build social unity through universal civic duty. With an extraordinarily high rejection percentage of more than 80%, the initiative failed, demonstrating widespread popular pessimism regarding an extension of general service responsibilities ([Swissvotes 2025c](#)). The second initiative voted on the same day, titled "For a Future", proposed the introduction of a federal inheritance and gift tax on very large fortunes (exceeding CHF 50 million) to finance climate protection and social measures. This initiative was strongly promoted by actors on the political left, especially the Young Socialists. It was rejected by a clear majority of 78% thus confirming Switzerland's tax and wealth regime's conservative approach regarding drastic redistributive plans ([Swissvotes 2025a](#)).

Slovenia

Slovenia held two referendums on different ballot dates. The first was held on the 11th of May 2025 and concerned the increase in pensions for artists. The goal of the law was to provide a financial supplement to elderly artists to have received the highest national awards for their work and made a contribution to Slovenian culture ([Državna Volilna Komisija 2025a](#)). The law was rejected by voters.

The second was held on the 23rd of November 2025 and had its background in a non-binding referendum in 2024 regarding assisted suicide. Following the favourable result of that initial vote, the Slovenian Parliament passed a new act introducing the possibility of patients suffering from incurable medical conditions to seek a painless death through assisted suicide ([Državna Volilna Komisija 2025b](#)). The opposition was able to mobilize enough eligible voters to trigger an optional referendum. In this popular vote, this law was rejected by a majority of around 53% ([Zivolovic 2025](#)).

Cayman Islands

The British Overseas Territory of the Cayman Islands held three governmental referendums in 2025, all on the 30th of April ([Cayman Islands Government 2025](#)). While the proposals to decriminalize cannabis and to introduce a national lottery were accepted, the proposal to develop cruise berthing infrastructure was rejected by two-thirds of voters. All three referendums had a high turnout of 73%. This was the first time since 2012 that the Cayman Islands held referendums.

Ecuador

Ecuador voted on three constitutional referendums and one public consultation. The most controversial amendment was to lift the ban on foreign military bases, which was first introduced in the last total revision of 2008. The current constitution forbids in Article 5 the establishment of foreign military bases or foreign facilities for military purposes. The amendment would have allowed the establishment of foreign military bases on Ecuadorian soil ([Valencia 2025](#)). Other constitutional changes included the reduction of national assembly members and abrogating the obligation of permanent state funding for national parties. Finally, the people voted in a public consultation on whether a Constituent Assembly should be elected to draft a new constitution ([Consejo](#)

[Nacional Electoral del Ecuador 2025](#)). All referendums were launched top-down, and fit into a previously established trend of referendums being used by the political elites in Ecuador ([Welp 2022](#); [Altman 2014](#)).

None of these referendum questions were approved. Legalizing the establishment of foreign military bases was rejected by 60% of the voters ([Consejo Nacional Electoral del Ecuador 2025](#)).

Guinea

On the 21st of September 2025, Guineans voted on a new draft constitution put forward by the ruling military junta ([République de Guinée 2025](#)). The draft emerged from tensions surrounding a draft constitution project from 2019 under former President Alpha Condé. After serving two terms, Condé introduced a new constitution that would have allowed him to run for president a third time ([France 24 2019](#); [Le Temps 2020](#)). Not long after this draft constitution of 2019 was approved and Condé being sworn in, the military seized power of the country in a 2021 coup ([RTS 2021](#)).

The military junta then put a transitional government in power with the coup leader as its head. After dissolving the government, a new constitution was brought forward by the ruling junta, strengthening the president even more while making any future revisions very difficult ([République de Guinée 2025](#)). The draft constitution was officially accepted by 89% of voters. Later that year the coup leader, General Mamady Doumbouya, successfully ran for president ([Nunoo and Rakotomalala 2025](#)) despite having promised not to do so in 2021 ([Reuters 2025](#)). Bringing this constitution to vote can be seen as an original act of constitution-making. Therefore there is no legal basis for a referendum and its procedures to be found.

Hungary

On the 20th of June 2025, the Orbán government held a non-binding and unofficial referendum: the so called "Voks 2025" on the question whether Ukraine should join the EU or not. The trigger of this vote was the start of formal accession negotiations in the face of the war in Ukraine. Ukraine's membership was painted as an existential threat to Hungary's economy and security. After claiming that 95% of Hungarians had voted against Ukraine's accession, Orbán has repeatedly used this result as a political argument towards the EU ([kormany.hu 2025](#)).

Italy

On the 8th of June 2025, Italy held five abrogative referendums, four of which related to labour legislation and one to the acquisition of Italian citizenship. The first aimed to make it easier for workers to claim compensation by removing the liability limitations to subcontractors. The second sought to prevent the employers from hiring workers on a temporary basis without justification, aiming to encourage permanent employment. The third aimed at removing the six month cap on payouts for unfairly dismissed employees of small businesses. Therefore, dismissing workers unfairly would get expensive for small business owners. The fourth question targeted the "Job Act" of 2016 which made it easier for large companies to dismiss employees, by offering unfairly dismissed employees compensation instead of having to re-employ them. Lastly, the fifth question aimed at shortening the waiting time from ten years down to five years for applying for Italian citizenship ([Governo Italiano 2025](#)).

The Italian government asked citizens not to participate in the referendum, which resulted in an invalid result ([Amante and Armellini 2025](#)). For a referendum to be valid, the turnout must be at least 50% (Article 75 of the Italian Constitution). So although the majority of participating voters supported all five questions, the necessary threshold wasn't met.

Marshall Islands

On the 25th of April 2025, the citizens of the Marshall Islands voted on seven questions, six of which were accepted by the people. Topics were tightening citizenship requirements, increasing the number of seats and reorganizing in the Council of Iroij (Marshallese equivalent of Senate consisting of twelve traditional chiefs), granting original jurisdiction to their Traditional Rights Court (Court composing of traditional chiefs

exclusively deciding over traditional and customary law), establishing of an ombudsman for the investigation of corruption, amending requirements to run for a seat in parliament and reorganizing electoral districts ([Parliament of the Republic of the Marshall Islands 2025](#)).

Although six of these questions were accepted with over 70% of the votes and surpassing the two-thirds threshold, the turnout was relatively low. With only around 5,500 cast votes out of more than 40,000 citizens, engagement with the referendum remained limited ([Republic of the Marshall Islands 2025a, 2025b](#)).

Nauru

On October 11, 2025, Nauru held a constitutional referendum on extending the legislative term from three to four years at the same time as their parliamentary elections. The government proposal was rejected by the majority. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority to pass ([Republic of Nauru 2025](#)). This threshold was clearly missed as 55.33% voted “No” and only 44.67% in favor ([Nauru Electoral Commission 2025](#)).

Due to the small population of Nauru (11,947 in 2021) ([Nauru Bureau of Statistics 2023](#)), a relatively high turnout of around 70% can be assumed with 8,381 cast votes ([Nauru Electoral Commission 2025](#)).

Taiwan

On the 23rd of August 2025, Taiwan held a referendum on reopening of the Maanshan nuclear power plant, which had been closed just three months prior. Following the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the construction on the Lungmen nuclear power plant was halted, and a nuclear phase-out by 2025 was confirmed in two national referendums (2018 and 2021). Reasons for the third referendum were improvements of nuclear technologies as well as concerns about energy security and reaching climate objectives ([Blanchard 2025](#)).

To pass, the proposal required yes-votes of at least one-quarter (25%) of the total eligible voters and the number of “yes” votes to exceed the number of “no” votes. In this referendum, the threshold of 5 million yes-votes wasn't met. ([Blanchard 2025](#)).

2.2 Acceptance of national referendums

Previous work ([Ezzaini et al. 2024](#)) identified that acceptance varies with the type of a referendum - a trend we also find for this year.

The most common type of referendum this year was the governmental referendum, followed by optional referendums, and then citizen initiatives and mandatory referendums, as seen in [Figure 2.1](#). Governmental referendums were accepted most often. They were held in the Cayman Islands, Guinea, Hungary, the Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Taiwan. One-third of optional referendums was accepted this year, and no citizen initiatives nor mandatory referendums.

Figure 2.1: 2025 Referendum acceptance varies by type

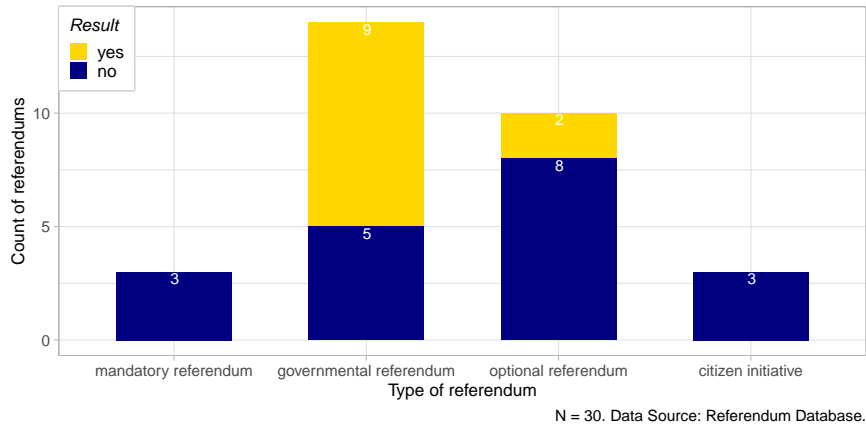


Figure 2.2: Yes-share variance in the year 2025

Showing variation in acceptance rate by type

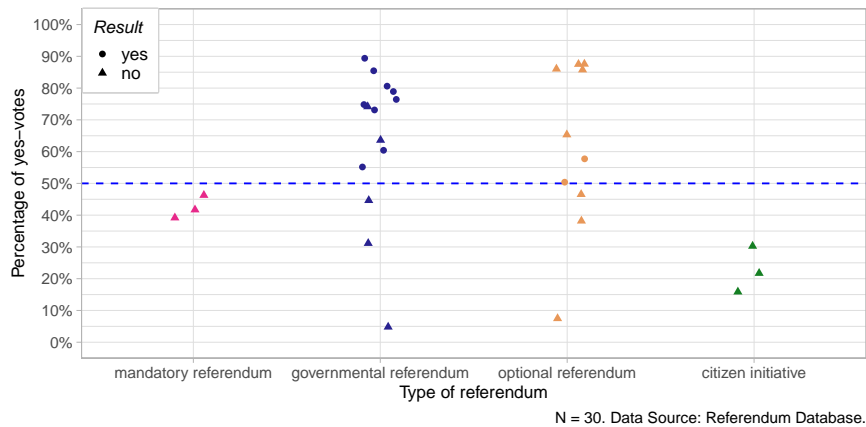


Figure 2.2 shows that most referendums in 2025 had clear results. There are differences between the types, however. Only mandatory and optional referendums saw close calls. The closest result was for the Swiss optional referendum on introducing a state-issued electronic identity, which just barely got accepted with a yes-share of 50.3%. Runner up is the optional Slovenian referendum on the introduction of the Assisted Voluntary End of Life Act, which was rejected with a yes-share of 46.5%. Directly following is the Ecuadorian vote on reducing the number of legislators, which was rejected with a yes-share of 46.3%. Most optional referendums were clearly accepted or rejected, however.

Unequivocal results are found with citizen initiatives and governmental referendums. The highest approval rate was achieved by the Swiss Environmental Responsibility initiative, with a still low yes-share of 30.3%.

In contrast, not only did most governmental referendums get accepted, eleven out of fourteen governmental referendums saw a decisive yes-share higher than 60%¹. Even so, one governmental referendum in the Marshall Islands was not accepted due to not reaching the required turnout quorum. The referendum in Nauru would have needed a two-thirds majority but only reached a yes-share of 44.7% and therefore was also clearly rejected. In Taiwan, the referendum on nuclear power was approved by a clear majority

¹ The most decisively rejected governmental referendum was the one held in Hungary, with a claimed yes-share of 4.8%. The desired result of the Orbán government had also been “no”, so here the low yes-share represents a win for the government nonetheless. However, as these results stem from more of a consultation than a regular referendum, these results should be interpreted with caution (Stégmayer 2026).

of the participating voters, but still failed to reach the required approval quorum of at least one quarter of total eligible voters.

Figure 2.2 also visualizes the impact of quorums. Even though three of the Italian optional referendums actually saw a high acceptance rate of over 85% participating voters, they still failed to meet the quorum requirements and therefore did not pass.

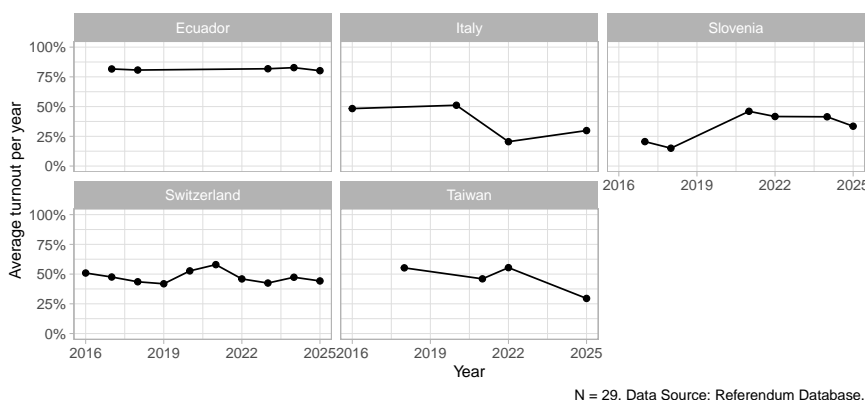
2.3 Turnout of national referendums

The turnout for referendums in 2025 varied drastically. The lowest turnout was observed in the Marshall Islands, where only 13% of voters participated. The highest turnout of 88% was officially recorded in Guinea, although this has been contested by political opponents who claim that they did not observe such a high turnout at polling stations (Bior 2025). This reported high turnout is in line with the literature on referendums in autocracies. Autocrats desire near-universal turnout to achieve the desired legitimization effect of referendums (Altman 2011, 95).

The second highest turnout was observed in Ecuador, where the turnout for the ballot date on the 16th of November was 80%. The turnout in Ecuador has been consistently high for every referendum held there, as can be seen in Figure 2.3. Figure 2.3 provides an overview of how the average turnout per year has changed over time for all countries that held a referendum in 2025.

Figure 2.3: Changes in turnout from 2016–2025

Showing countries that held a referendum in 2025 and more than two referendums from 2016–2025

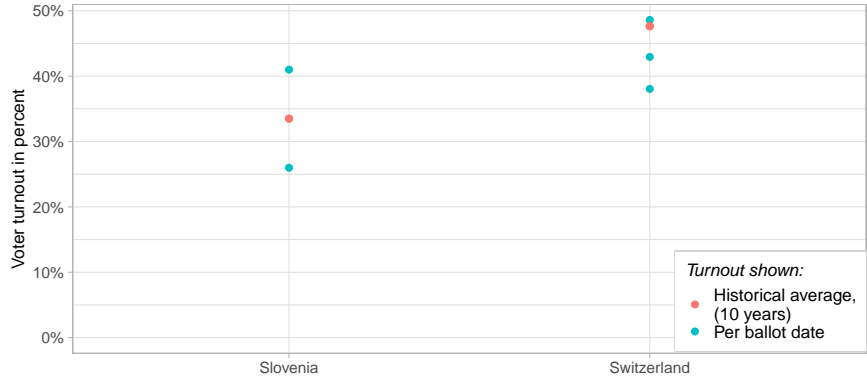


Referendum turnout in Italy was markedly lower in 2022 and 2025 than in 2020 and 2016. Relying on the average turnout for 2016 is a bit misleading however, as 2016 saw both a high turnout (65%) constitutional referendum and a low turnout (31%) referendum on preventing test drilling in the sea. This difference likely reflects differences in turnout quorum requirements. The constitutional referendums held in 2016 and 2020 were not subject to a turnout quorum. By contrast, the vote on test drilling in 2016, as well as all referendums in 2022 and 2025, were subject to quorum requirements, introducing incentives for strategic abstention among opponents. In line with these incentives, the Italian government, which opposed the 2025 referendums, called on citizens not to participate in the referendums (Wyl 2025).

In Taiwan, the 2025 referendum turnout was less than half of the turnout for the last series of referendums, held in 2022. In fact, even though the yes-votes (4,341,432) vastly exceeded the no-votes (1,511,693), the referendum failed due to not receiving enough yes-votes in total. Votes of 25% of the eligible voters, so 5 million, would have been required to pass the referendum. This is the first time since the yes-vote thresholds were lowered in 2018, that a non-constitutional referendum failed due to not meeting the required turnout quorum.

In Switzerland and Slovenia, average turnout declined slightly. Figure 2.4 provides a more differentiated perspective. Figure 2.4 shows the variation of turnout within the two countries for the year 2025, and also indicates the average turnout for the last ten years. In Switzerland, two out of three ballot dates saw a lower than average turnout, while the turnout for one ballot date was slightly above the average. In Slovenia, the vote on pension supplements for artists saw a lower turnout than in the last years and is more comparable to turnout last seen in 2018. The turnout for the second referendum on the Assisted Voluntary End of Life Act in turn was comparable to the average for the last ten years, with a turnout of 41%.

Figure 2.4: Turnout variance within the year 2025
 Shown by ballot date and country

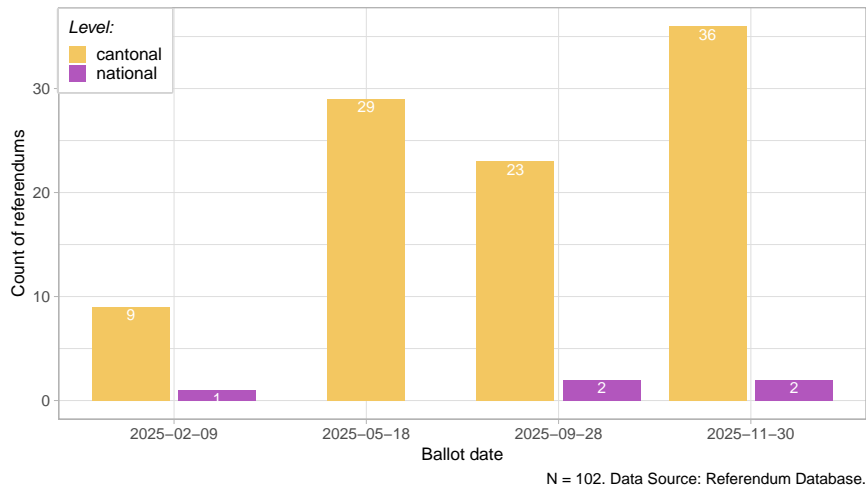


Showing countries which held more than one referendum in 2025. Data Source: Referendum Database.

3 Swiss cantonal referendums in 2025

3.1 Overview of cantonal referendums

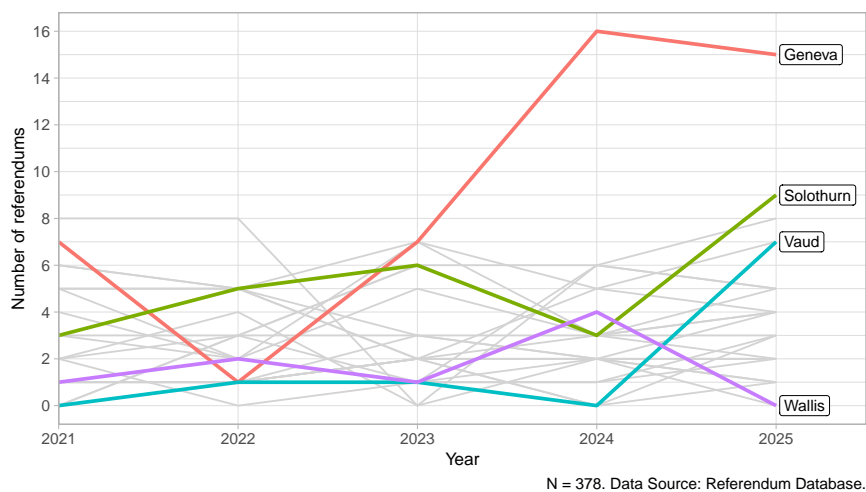
Figure 3.1: Number of Swiss referendums in 2025



97 cantonal referendums were held in 2025. As seen in Figure 3.1, most referendum votes in Switzerland are held at the cantonal rather than the federal level. Even so, per ballot date and canton it varies whether a citizen votes on more national or cantonal referendums. For example, on the 28th of September, voters in Lucerne only voted on two national referendums, whereas voters in Vaud voted on four cantonal referendums and the two national referendums.

Figure 3.2: Recent developments in referendum frequency

Cantonal referendums per year and canton

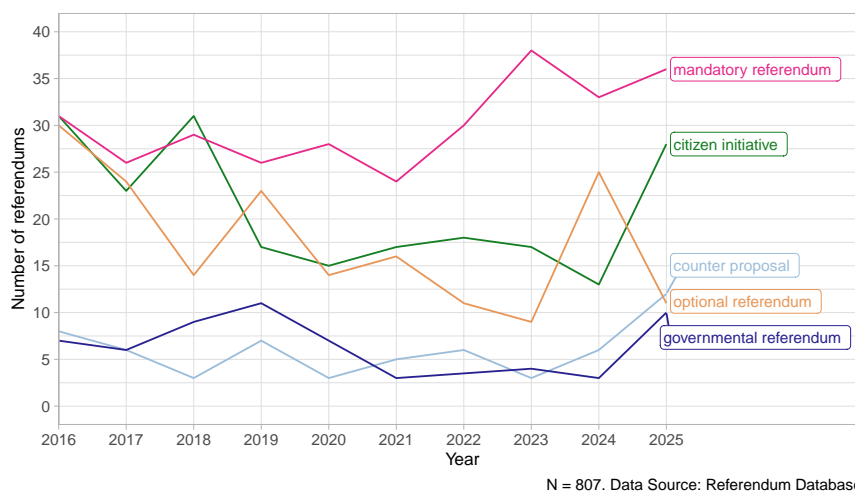


As seen in Figure 3.2 most cantons had a similar number of cantonal referendums as in the last years. While most cantons see fairly consistent number of cantonal referendums,

not all do. Geneva's count of referendums per year fluctuates between one and sixteen, which continues to be unmatched by any other canton (Félix and Frossard 2024). In 2025, Geneva held fifteen referendums, in 2024 sixteen. No other canton has held a comparable number of referendums in either year. Solothurn saw a slight decrease in 2024, and a strong increase again to nine referendums in 2025. Vaud, after holding no cantonal referendums in 2024, held seven referendums in 2025, more than in the previous four years combined. In contrast, Wallis, which held four referendums in 2024, did not hold any in 2025. Neuchatel also did not hold any cantonal referendums in 2025. The detailed development of all cantons within the last ten years can be seen in Figure 5.1 in the appendix.

Glarus and Appenzell Innerrhoden are *Landsgemeinde* cantons. Each held one citizen assembly in 2025 (Staatskanzlei Kanton Glarus 2025; Kanton Appenzell Innerrhoden 2025).

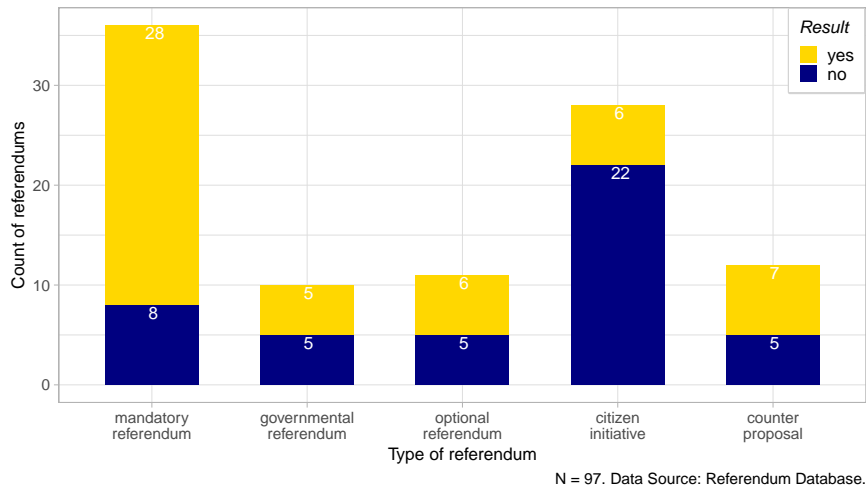
Figure 3.3: Types of cantonal referendums in 2025



With 36 held votes, the most frequent type of referendum in 2025 was the mandatory referendum. This has also been the case for the past two years, as shown in Figure 3.3. The second most common was the citizen initiative with 28 held votes, which was the most common citizen initiatives have been since 2018. Optional referendums did not continue the spike observed in 2024. Both governmental referendums and counter proposals have seen an increase. Interestingly, even if the count of citizen initiatives was similar for 2018 and 2025, the ratio of counter proposals to citizen initiatives was lower in 2018 than in 2025.

3.2 Acceptance of cantonal referendums

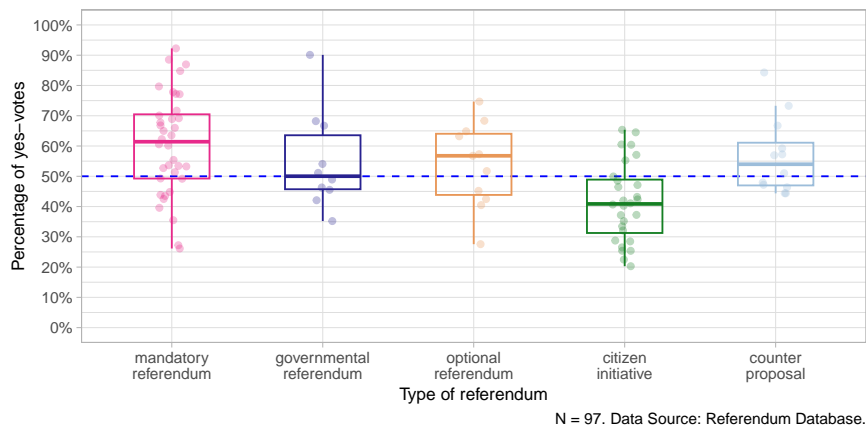
Figure 3.4: Cantonal referendum acceptance by type in 2025



As Figure 3.4 shows, mandatory referendums had the highest chance to pass this year at the cantonal level. Citizen initiatives had the lowest, which can be expected from previous findings (Ezzaini et al. 2024).

Figure 3.5: Cantonal variance in yes-share in 2025

Showing acceptance variation by type



In Figure 3.5, it become apparent that the range and distribution of the yes-shares differ dependent on the type of referendum.

Mandatory referendums

Mandatory referendums saw a yes-share of 26.1% at the lowest and of 92.3% at the highest, with a mean yes-share of 60.5%. The clearest rejection of a cantonal mandatory referendum was in Vaud. On the 30th of November and with only 26.1% yes-votes, voters in Vaud rejected changes to the cantonal constitution that would have granted voting rights to persons under a general guardianship or a mandate for incapacity due to a lasting inability to exercise sound judgement. Interestingly, a provision aiming to do the same was accepted in the canton of Zug on the same day, with a slim majority of a yes-share of 51.3%. This continues a trend of cantonal differences in voting rights for people placed under guardianship. In contrast, at the federal level, citizens placed under guardianship do not have voting rights at all (SRF-Regionalredaktionen 2025).

The mandatory referendum most unequivocally accepted in 2025 was held on the 18th of May in Geneva, with a yes-share of 92.3% (5,928 no-votes to 70,565 yes-votes). The constitutional change corrected a previously introduced inconsistency in signature requirements for municipal citizen initiatives. A previous referendum had lowered the signature requirements for municipal citizen initiatives in accordance to their size but accidentally introduced proportionally higher signature requirements for small municipalities.

The closest mandatory referendum in 2025 was held in Uri, where a difference of 136 votes led to the rejection of the revision of the social assistance act. Key changes planned in the revised social assistance act were new provisions to prevent abuse, to regulate Protection Status S in the asylum system, and to specify the treatment of assets. The provision was supported by a coalition of the Mitte party, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and Liberal Party (FDP), whereas the Green-Liberal Party (GLP), the Greens, and the Socialist Democratic Party (SP) opposed it ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025b](#)). In interviews, both cantonal presidents of the SP and the Mitte considered the same issue the cause for the rejection - a new policy that would have led to a reduction of social assistance payout, if applicants had given away a part of their financial assets within the last ten years before application ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025b](#)). In the provision, this was called a "voluntary relinquishment of assets" and could have caused a reduction of social assistance payout to possibly zero ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025b](#)).

Optional referendums

Optional referendums saw a yes-share of 27.6% at the lowest and of 74.7% at the highest, with a mean yes-share of 53.9%. The optional referendum with lowest yes-share was held in Uri on the 30th of November. Voters rejected the revision of the public school ordinance, which would have removed the mandatory linkage between a teacher's employment workload and the number of lessons to be taught, and added a provision of optional additional resources for large classes. The Uri Teachers' Association (LUR) had launched a referendum against the proposal. In the interest of equal opportunities, the association took issue with the additional resources not being mandatorily provided for all large classes and demanded that the canton contribute to the costs incurred when additional resources were provided ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025c](#)).

The most accepted optional referendum in 2025 was also held on the 30th of November but in Obwalden. The referendum was about an addendum to the health insurance act, which changed the budgeting practice for state-sponsored reductions to health insurance premiums. The given reason for the change was to improve budgeting accuracy and the speed at which the reductions could be paid out, reducing the burden on recipients earlier ([Kanton Obwalden 2025](#)). The SP had launched the referendum against the changes, citing concerns over cuts to premium reductions, but failed to sufficiently convince the voters.

The optional referendum with the closest results in 2025 was held in Lucerne, on the 18th of May. With a yes-share of 51.7% (42,245 yes- to 39,440 no-votes), voters obligated hospitals to provide a set minimum of services. These include that basic and emergency care must cover at least the areas of internal medicine, general surgery, gynecology/obstetrics, anesthesia, intensive care at the level of an intermediate care unit, and an interdisciplinary emergency department with 24-hour availability ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025a](#)). The provision had been opposed by a coalition of the GLP and FDP, whereas a broad coalition of SP, the Greens, SVP, and the Mitte had supported it. Considering the broad support, it is somewhat surprising that the result was so close. It seems that the argument of too restrictive planning and cost increases ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025a](#)) resonated with voters. In the context of ever increasing healthcare costs ([SRF 4 News 2025b](#)) that may not be too surprising.

Governmental referendums

The mean yes-share for governmental referendums in 2025 was 54.8%. Whereas obligatory minimum service provision for hospitals was just barely passed in Lucerne, voters of the neighboring canton of Obwalden voted to remove a similar law for the canton of Obwalden just five months later, in 2025's most successful governmental referendum.

90.11% percent of voters agreed to the introduction of a hospital network and more flexibility in which hospital has to provide which services ([Kanton Obwalden 2025](#)).

The governmental referendum with the lowest yes-share was held in St. Gallen. The St. Gallen electorate clearly rejected the proposal to extend legal store opening times by up to four hours with a yes-share of 35.2%. This was the fourth time longer store opening times have been on the ballot in St. Gallen and each attempt was rejected so far, the last time in 2010 ([Regionaljournal Ostschweiz 2025](#)). St. Gallen's director of economic affairs blamed the rejection on the extent of the extension, stating that an increase of just one hour might have had better chances ([Regionaljournal Ostschweiz 2025](#)). In contrast, in 2010, voters also rejected the proposal to extend the store opening times by just one hour, then with a yes-share of 36.5%. While times may have changed, it seems that voters in St. Gallen simply do not support extending store opening times.

The closest referendum outcome for governmental referendums in 2025 was for a referendum on the implementation of the amended health insurance act in the canton of Zurich, which was just barely rejected on the 30th of November with a yes-share of 48.9%. A majority of the cantonal parliament had decided to increase the cantonal contribution to health insurance premium reductions to match the contribution of the federal level. This was aimed at alleviating the financial burden of health insurance premiums on low-to middle income households but would have increased costs to the canton of Zurich. A minority of the cantonal parliament launched a referendum against this amendment, and the cantonal government recommended that voters reject it ([Staatskanzlei Kanton Zürich 2025](#)). Despite the rising costs of health insurance premiums ([SRF 4 News 2025b](#)), voters followed the recommendation of the government.

Citizen initiatives

Citizen initiatives saw a yes-share of 20.3% at the lowest and of 65.4% at the highest, with a mean yes-share of 56.6%. The least successful citizen initiative was voted on in Geneva, on the 18th of May. The initiative called "j'y vis, j'y paie!" ("I live here, I pay here!") was unequivocally rejected with a yes-share of 20.9%. The proposal would have abolished tax sharing between the municipality of residence and the municipality of the place of work, in favor of the municipality of residence.

Much more successful was a citizen initiative voted on in Grison. On the 30th of November, voters accepted a constitutional amendment that abolished life long pensions for former members of the cantonal government with a yes-share of 65.4%. The cantonal parliament had recommended to reject the initiative and instead promoted a counter proposal that would have permitted bridge payments after a government member left office. This counter proposal was rejected by voters, with a yes-share of 47.2%.

The closest referendum outcome for a citizen initiative was a yes-share of 49.9%. On the 30th of November, voters in Geneva just barely rejected the proposal to promote accessibility, especially financial accessibility, of dental treatments with a difference of 142 votes (preliminary results). Dental treatments are generally not covered by the mandatory Swiss health insurance ([Bundesamt für Gesundheit 2026](#)). The initiative was more successful than the corresponding counter proposal, for which the yes-share was 44.4%, the second lowest for counter proposals in 2025.

Table 3.1: Counter proposals usually see more popular support than citizen initiatives

Comparing the yes-share of citizen initiatives and corresponding counter proposals

Canton	Proposal	Yes-share	
		Counter proposal	Citizen initiative
Geneva	Accessible dental care	44.40%	49.90%
Grison	Abolish pension for government members	47.20%	65.40%
Zug	Added value tax	46.40%	26.50%
Zurich	More affordable housing	51.00%	40.70%
Zurich	Right for digital integrity	44.40%	25.40%
Geneva	Canton that walks	57.00%	43.20%
Geneva	Boost solar/renewable energy	84.30%	42.30%
Geneva	Tax splitting	48.00%	20.30%
Lucerne	Childcare for all	57.20%	22.50%
Basel-City	Safe bicycle routes	59.20%	37.20%
Bern	Bern solar	66.70%	28.80%
Vaud	Save Mormont	73.30%	41.10%

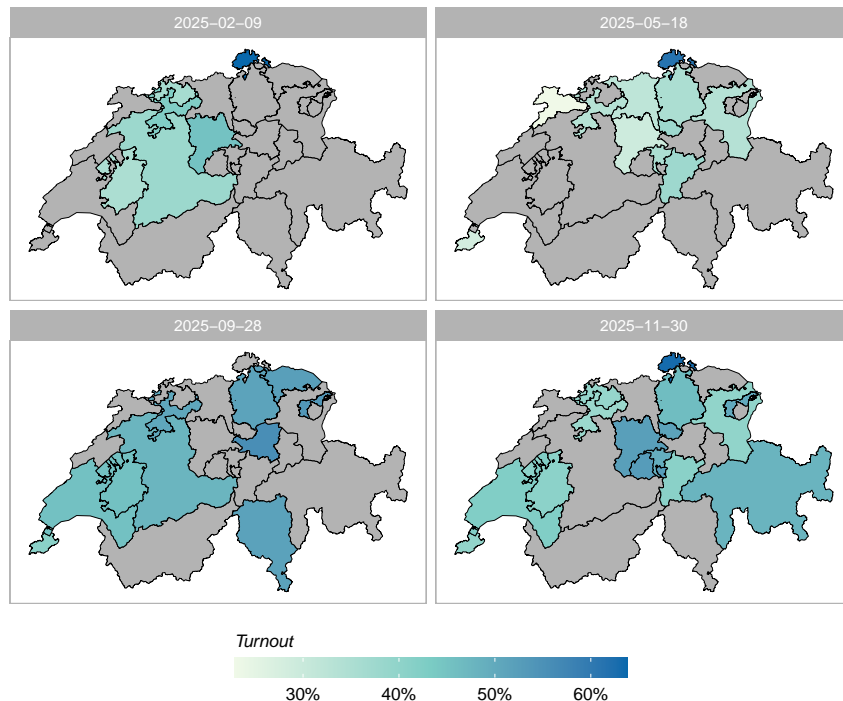
Data Source: Referendum Database.

Of the 28 citizen initiatives voted on in 2025, 12 initiatives were voted on at the same time as a counter proposals by parliament. In only the two previously discussed cases did citizen initiatives gain more support than the counter proposal. It was much more common for support for counter proposals to eclipse the support for citizen initiatives.

3.3 Turnout of cantonal referendums

Figure 3.6: Cantonal turnout variation in 2025

Mean turnout by ballot date and canton



Map data from the Federal Office of Topography swisstopo.

Figure 3.6 shows the average turnout for cantonal referendums per canton and ballot date. The referendums in February and May had a lower turnout for most cantons than those later in the year. No national referendums were held in May which could have been drivers for participation. While there was a national vote in February, it was one with a low turnout of 38% itself.

Schaffhausen had the highest turnout on all ballot dates. Both the cantonal votes in February and November saw a participation rate of 63% percent, and the one in May 61%. The November vote was on a structural renewal of hospital in Schaffhausen. The February vote was an amendment of the road traffic tax act and the May votes concerned a revision of the spatial planning law, the ombudsman act and the energy act. As Schaffhausen has compulsory voting (Schwegler 2009), it is not surprising that participation is consistently high, independent of the specific votes.

The highest turnout in a canton without compulsory voting could be observed in Schwyz, where the September vote on increasing teacher's salaries had a turnout of 55.67%. This is barely below the participation in Schwyz for the two national referendum votes on the same day, which was 57.20% and 57.59%, respectively (Kanton Schwyz 2025). A similarly close turnout between national and cantonal votes in Schwyz can also be observed in a previous ballot date. The September vote in 2024 on financing the building a new police center saw a small difference in turnout of ~2 percentage points. In contrast, the cantonal vote on the 9th of June 2024 on the new rules of procedure of the cantonal parliament had a turnout of 43.97% in contrast to the national votes on the same day, where turnout varied from 48.41% to 48.59%. Similarly, the cantonal referendum had a ~5 percentage points lower participation than the national referendums in the previous referendum in September 2021. Going further back does not immediately establish a pattern in which cantonal referendums see a higher turnout. So, even if the turnout is by and large driven by the national referendums, it seems like there are still factors specific to the cantonal votes that increase or lower their turnout, and their turnout is not purely driven by mobilization effects of the national referendums.

The cantonal referendum with the lowest turnout this year was held in May in Jura. Jurassiens voted on an amendment to the cantonal constitution introducing transitional provisions to the debt break. This measure was intended to allow the canton to manage the financial consequences of the integration of the municipality of Moutier without being forced to make severe budget cuts or breach fiscal rules. After a prolonged political process, Moutier became part of the canton of Jura instead of Bern on January 1st, 2026. It is somewhat surprising that this vote saw such low turnout, as the change of the municipality itself, as well as the broader splitting of Bern into Bern and Jura was highly salient. Then again, the salient decisions on the future of the municipality had already been made and, with a yes-share of 70%, this amendment was not a close call. So perhaps this was simply the uncontroversial aftermath of a previously controversial process.

Figure 3.7: Cantonal and national turnout over the last ten years

Showing yearly average turnout for cantonal and national votes

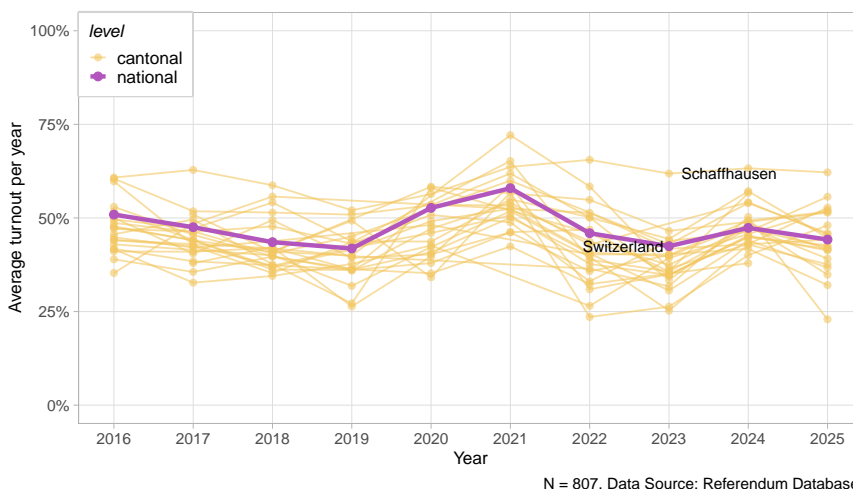


Figure 3.7 shows how the turnout for cantonal referendums has changed over ten years. It is apparent that by and large cantonal turnout is driven by the mobilization of national ballot issues. Still, there are differences between the cantons over the years. For one,

the variation between years varies - whereas the turnout in Bern was consistent from 2021 (46.2%) to 2022 (46.9%), the turnout in Grison decreased from 56.9% to 23.5%. Schaffhausen, the only canton with compulsory voting, has seen a consistently high turnout.

Detailed differences in turnout between all cantons can be found in the appendix.

3.4 Topics of cantonal referendums

3.4.1 Economic policy

The conflict over the state's role in minimum salary and the dispute over the regulatory frameworks for corporate governance and retail were the main objectives of cantonal economic policy discussions in 2025. Voters in a number of cantons were mobilised by the cantonal minimum wage dispute, which was a major theme. Even though living expenses were on the rise nationwide ([Bundesamt für Statistik 2026](#)), voters were still cautious of strict salary regulations. With a yes-vote share of 48.6%, the proposal for a 22 CHF minimum hourly wage in Basel-Landschaft was denied on the 9th of February. On the same day, the rejection was even more noticeable in Solothurn where a minimum hourly wage initiative failed with only 42% of voters supporting it. A similar proposal was also rejected on the 30th of November 2025 in the canton of Fribourg, gaining an insufficient yes-share of 46.5%.

Beyond the minimum salary, the issue of pay equity was also put to a vote. With a yes-share of 37.2% of the vote, the citizen initiative "Equal Pay in the Canton of Aargau – Now!" was rejected in Aargau on the 18th of May 2025. The initiative had demanded stricter wage evaluations for businesses with more than 50 employees. An additional economic policy decision was the previously discussed rejection of expanding opening hours of retail establishments in St. Gallen. Last but not least, the popular initiative "Yes to independence – regulate board of directors mandates" aimed to reduce conflicts of interest for members of the cantonal executive in the canton of Nidwalden by increasing supervision on outside employment of members of the executive ([Regionaljournal Zentralschweiz 2025d](#)). The proposal was rejected with 33.5% yes-votes on the 30th of November 2025.

3.4.2 Social Policy

Intense discussions over the growing cost of living and the scope of state accountability for social infrastructure defined cantonal social policy in 2025. The housing market, pricey daycare, and the cost of health insurance premiums were the three main areas of attention for direct democratic processes. The cantonal "Rent Initiative" (Miet-Initiative), which called for greater openness by requiring the disclosure of prior rents, was passed by voters in Bern on the 28th of September 2025. Similarly, a campaign advocating for additional cooperative housing was supported by 60.4% of voters in Geneva on September 28, 2025. On the 30th of November 2025, the initiative "More affordable housing in the Canton of Zurich" was turned down with 40.7% yes votes while the counter proposal marginally passed with 51.0% yes-votes. Additionally, the "Added Value Initiative" (Mehrwert-Initiative), which aimed to provide a just framework for urban densification, was voted on in the canton of Zug on the 18th of May 2025. Voters turned down the citizen initiative with 26.5% yes-votes and the counter proposal with 46.4% yes-votes.

Initiatives designed to reduce the organisational and financial strain on low-income homes and families substantially expanded the social policy agenda. A number of cantons voted to increase state support in the childcare sector. Voters in Luzern (November 30, 2025) turned down the popular initiative "Affordable childcare for all" with 22.5% yes-votes but accepted its corresponding governmental counter-proposal with 57.2% yes-votes. In Uri (May 18, 2025), voters turned down the Childcare Act with 42.5% yes-votes.

Additionally, the pressure of growing healthcare expenses (SRF 4 News 2025b) likely led to the proposals in Tessin (September 28, 2025), where two measures aimed to “stop the explosion” of these prices and make health insurance premiums fully tax deductible (RSI 2025). Both citizen initiatives were accepted with 57.1% and 60.5% yes-votes, respectively. Lastly, the previously discussed initiative “For dental care accessible to the entire population” was narrowly turned down with 49.9% yes-votes by the electorate in Geneva.

3.4.3 State organization

Fundamental issues pertaining to democratic participation and the modernisation of cantonal institutions dominated the topic of state organization in 2025. The referendums’ scope ranged from the extension of voting rights for various demographic groups to significant changes to cantonal constitutions. Especially the canton of Vaud experienced a push for inclusion of people residing overseas, foreigners, and vulnerable groups, albeit with varying success. On the 30th of November, the vaudoise electorate rejected extending cantonal voting rights to people under legal guardianship with 26.1% yes-votes. In contrast, Vaud accepted voting rights for citizens living abroad with 64.9% yes-votes. In contrast, a similar proposal was just barely accepted with 51.3% yes-votes on the same day in the canton of Zug. Also in Vaud, a parliamentarian and a citizen initiative aimed to grant longterm foreign residents the right to vote in local matters. Both were rejected: the citizen initiative for cantonal voting rights on the 28th of September with a yes-share of 43.8% and the parliamentarian proposal for municipal voting rights on the 30th of November with 35.2% yes-votes. Similarly, granting cantonal voting rights to longterm foreign residents in Appenzell-Ausserrhoden was rejected with 26% yes-votes on the 30th of November. On the 9th of February, voters in Lucerne rejected, with 20.9% yes-votes, decreasing the voting age to 16, which had been demanded by a citizen initiative.

Beyond participation rights, several cantons addressed the structural framework of their governance and legal systems. On the 18th of May, the electorate in Geneva accepted with 88.5% yes-votes a comprehensive package pertaining to judicial administration, which included enhancing judicial monitoring and holding a general election for the judiciary. Important institutional milestones were also reached throughout the year, including the total revision of the cantonal constitution in Appenzell Ausserrhoden on the 30th of November 2025. The revision was accepted with 75.0% yes-votes. The implementation of cantonal double representation in Basel-Landschaft on the 9th of February and changes to the amount of signatures needed for municipal matters in Geneva were two other significant structural changes. They were accepted with 66.8% and 92.3% yes-votes, respectively.

4 Completing cantonal referendum data

Previously, comprehensive documentation of cantonal referendums in the Referendum Database (RDB) started in 1970. Starting in the next version of the data set, the RDB records cantonal referendum events starting in 1831 - earlier than the founding of modern Switzerland.

With this new information, we can reexamine the trend of decreasing referendum usage. What was previously seen as a decline from a status quo now emerges as coming down from a peak. This pattern does, however, not apply to all cantons. The historically different trends of referendum practice of the different cantons can help explain the overall drivers of referendum practice change in future research.

The additional data also shows some historical continuity. National referendums have seen more turnout than cantonal referendums, ever since they were introduced. The most common type of referendum in the 2000s was also the common frequent type of referendum in the 1900s. Only in the last 20 years have citizens initiatives started to catch up to mandatory and optional referendums in Basel-Stadt and Zurich. This added context makes the shift to citizens initiatives stand out more.

The next sections discuss the additional data, delve deeper into the findings, and, by identifying points for further research, show the potential of the extended referendum database.

4.1 Additional referendum data

Cantonal data collection originally started as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project “Kaleidoskop Volksrechte: Die Institutionen der direkten Demokratie in den Kantonen 1970-1997” no 53541. Then, 1970 was chosen as a starting point as it coincided with the “participatory age” in which political participation of citizens in Switzerland increased (Trechsel and Serdült 1999). Since then, the cantonal referendum practice has been kept up to date.

The now added data on cantonal referendums prior to 1970 was made available to the RDB Team by Professor Dominik Hangartner (ETHZ) and Professor Lukas Schmid (University of Lucerne). It contains information on over 6,000 referendums in 21 cantons from 1831 onwards. The data was collected by a research team at the Universities of Bern and St. Gallen from 2010 to 2015. The data was collected from a variety of sources: Cantonal archives, cantonal state chancelleries, cantonal statistical offices, official gazettes, and scientific publications. The data collection effort was funded by the SNSF project [Compulsory Voting grant no 141317](#) at the University of St. Gallen and by the Basic Research Fund (Grundlagenforschungsfonds) of the University of St. Gallen. The data was used in the publications by Bechtel, Hangartner, and Schmid (2016) and Bechtel, Hangartner, and Schmid (2018). We are grateful to Nils Bürk, Dominik Hangartner, Fabian Morgenthaler, Vasco Schelbert, Lukas Schmid and Christian Vogt for their data collection and curation efforts.

When preparing the additional data for to be read into the RDB, we identified multiple issues. For one, some data is erroneous, leading for example to negative vote counts. Then, the electorate is not always recorded. Where possible, it was calculated based on the available turnout and vote count information. Additionally, the type of the referendum is often times not recorded or explanation of the used codes is missing. In five cantons types were seemingly recorded but without codebook. We contacted the relevant cantonal authorities for further information. Unfortunately they do not have this information either. One positive is that the open government data office from Thurgau

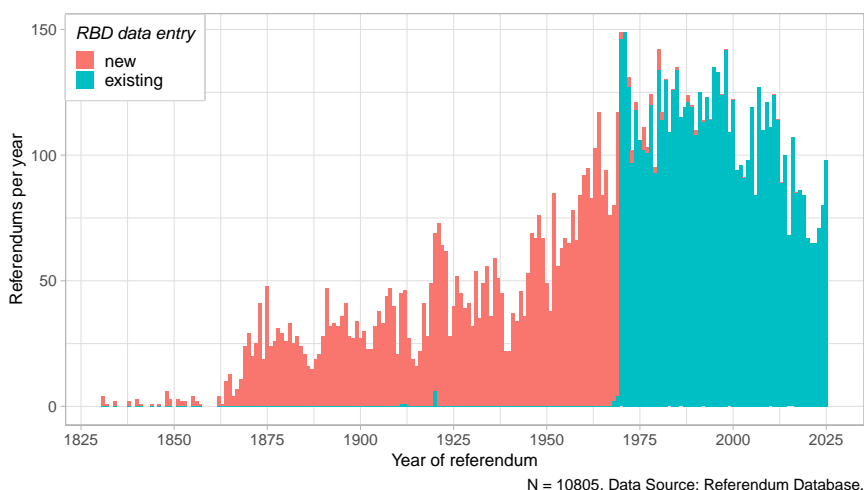
expressed interest in publishing the data for Thurgau on their own website, showing the relevance of this information. Finally, the recording of empty and invalid votes is handled very differently, sometimes within the same canton. We solved this by creating three different columns for empty, invalid, and empty AND invalid votes, depending on how they were recorded.

In total, the RDB expands by 4, cantonal referendums, increasing the number of cantonal referendum cases from 6,096 to 10,805. Of these additions, 4,658 stem from before 1970 and therefore precede the previous coding starting point of the RDB. An additional 51 issues were added that had been missing within the previously covered period, improving the RDB's comprehensiveness. With the added historical cases a more complete picture of the history of Swiss direct democracy emerges.

4.2 A new pattern emerges

Figure 4.1: Usage of cantonal direct democracy

Sum of all cantonal referendums per year



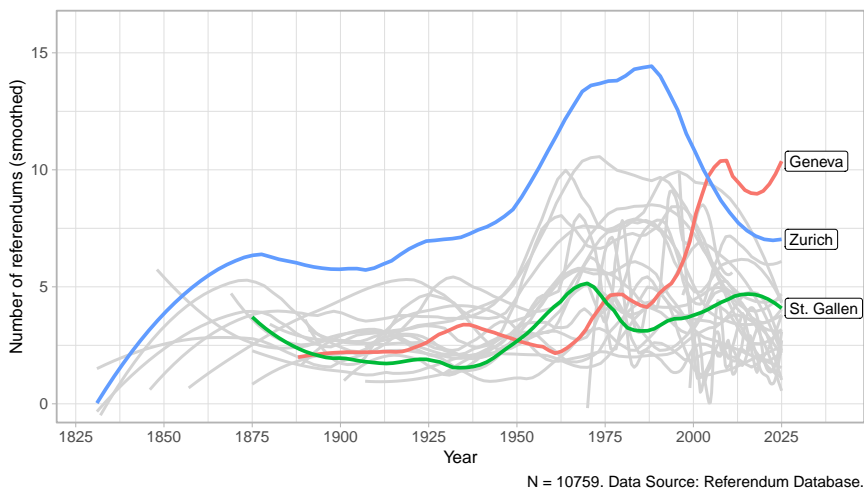
As becomes apparent in Figure 4.1, the addition of data from before 1970 changes the picture of the frequency of referendums. Certainly, as was previously established in the World of Referendums Report 2024 (Ezzaini et al. 2024), the count of referendums has been decreasing since 2000. However, it is now evident that the period from the early 1970s to 2000 was especially active when it comes to cantonal referendums. Even if it is now decreasing in comparison to this high point, the scale of the increase is notable. In the 50 years since the 1970s, 7054 cantonal referendums took place. The 140 years before saw less than five thousand referendums in almost triple the time. It looks like the rate of referendums started rising in the post-war period, peaking from 1970 until the end of the millennium, and has been falling since.

What looks like an overall trend is mainly driven by a few cantons, notably Zurich, Solothurn, and Schaffhausen. Not every canton follows this pattern, as shown in Figure 4.2. Some cantons, like St. Gallen, Vaud or Schwyz have seen fairly consistent and comparatively low ballot counts over the years. Others, like Geneva, actually see a spike of ballot issues outside the main period.

These regionally different usage patterns can be studied in further research to explain better what drove the increase from 1970-2000. One possible explanation could be that with the introduction of women's right to vote, the electorate doubled but the signature requirements for referendums did not. At the national level, it took six years after the introduction of women's right to vote until the signature requirements were increased (Rielle 2010). If this is a factor, it could also partially explain the outdrawn period in which we see increased referendum numbers, as the introduction of women's right to vote at the cantonal level varied between 1960 and 1990 (Dermont 2021). Each canton

Figure 4.2: Cantonal differences in referendum frequency

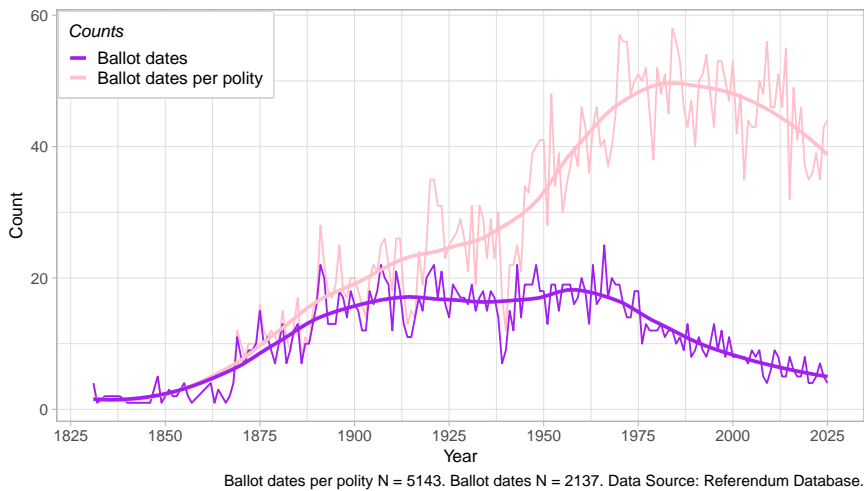
Referendums per year and canton



might have needed time to adjust legal requirements for citizens. It likely is by far not the only driver of the increased participation, however, as the 1970s also saw general changes in political activity and new social movements (Rielle 2010; Trechsel and Serdült 1999). It would be an interesting study nonetheless how and which of these different factors shaped the period.

4.3 Ballot dates

Figure 4.3: More cantons are holding referendums and increasingly on the same days as national referendums

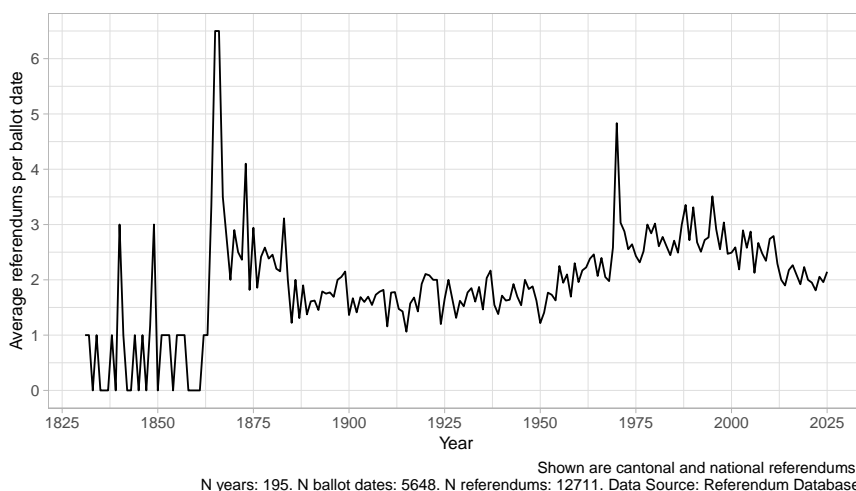


In this section we investigate a previously identified trend towards unification of ballot dates. Specifically, Figure 4.3 shows how until ca. the 1900s, the number of unique ballot dates per year (ballot dates) increased at a similar rate to the total number of ballot dates per year and canton (ballot dates per polity), and then the trends diverge. While more and more cantons hold multiple ballot dates per year, they increasingly fall onto the same days of the calendar. Especially from the 1970s on the variance of calendar days chosen to hold a referendum decreases, even as the number of cantons holding referendums is high. The increased number of cantons holding referendums follows a similar pattern to the number of referendums per year. As referendum practice increases, more ballot dates become necessary to handle the votes.

The count of ballot dates increased from 1831 to 1880, then stayed fairly constant until the late 1960s, and has been declining since. The first phase of increasing likely corresponds to the period in which more and more cantons introduced direct democratic instrument, or changed from citizens' assemblies to voting at the urn. In turn, as referendum practice increases in the 1970s, and postal voting is introduced (Ezzaini et al. 2024), the decrease of ballot dates is likely due to streamlining cantonal ballot dates to correspond to the national ballot dates.

Looking at Figure 4.4, it could be that the reducing the amount of ballot dates may have kept the count of issues per ballot date up even when the total number of referendums began to decrease. This could be worth further study, as being overwhelmed by too many ballot issues has been identified as detrimental to voter engagement (Flick Witzig and Vatter 2022). Figure 4.4 also shows two marked peaks. The first was from 1864-1866, during which referendum practice in Basel-Landschaft and Zurich was especially active. The topics of the votes do not seem to explain this frequency, nor were the instruments just introduced as far as we know. So, this peak remains mysterious at this point in time. The second peak was in 1970, where the topics also do not show a clear pattern to explain the heightened frequency. This peak may have resulted from the observed increased public interest in political participation (Trechsel and Serdült 1999).

Figure 4.4: Referendums per ballot date



4.4 Turnout

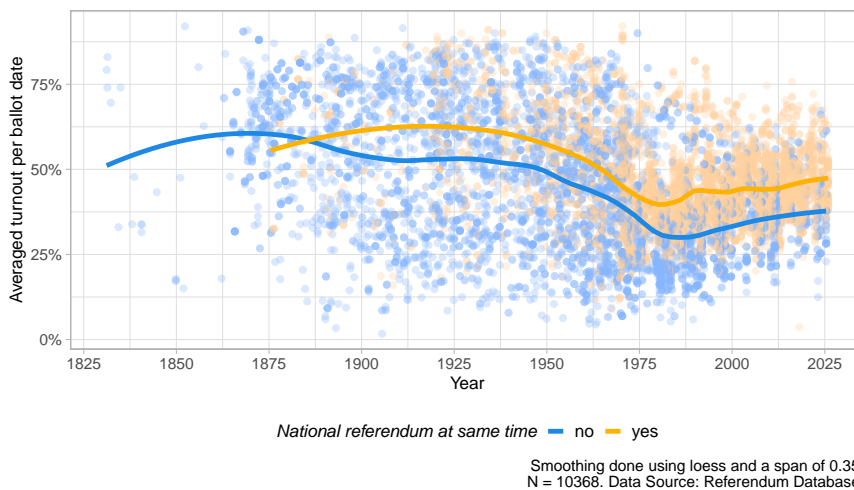
Analyzing the turnout of early cantonal referendums indicates that the turnout trend of cantonal referendums mirrors the one of national referendums. The same factors underlying changes of national turnout likely also drive cantonal turnout. However, the decline in turnout was more pronounced at the cantonal level than at the national level between the late 1970s and the early 2000s. In recent years, turnout trends at the two levels have again converged.

It is also noteworthy that May 23rd of 1875 is the first day on record on which a cantonal and national referendum have taken place at the same time - 44 years after the first recorded cantonal referendum took place. While this was a new occurrence then, by now, it is general practice.

The smoothed trend in Figure 4.5 indicates that the introduction of national referendums may have decreased interest in cantonal referendums. This might also be an artifact of how the data is displayed and needs further study before anything substantial can be concluded.

Figure 4.5: National referendum events drive turnout

Trend over time shown by smoothing variation in cantonal referendum turnout

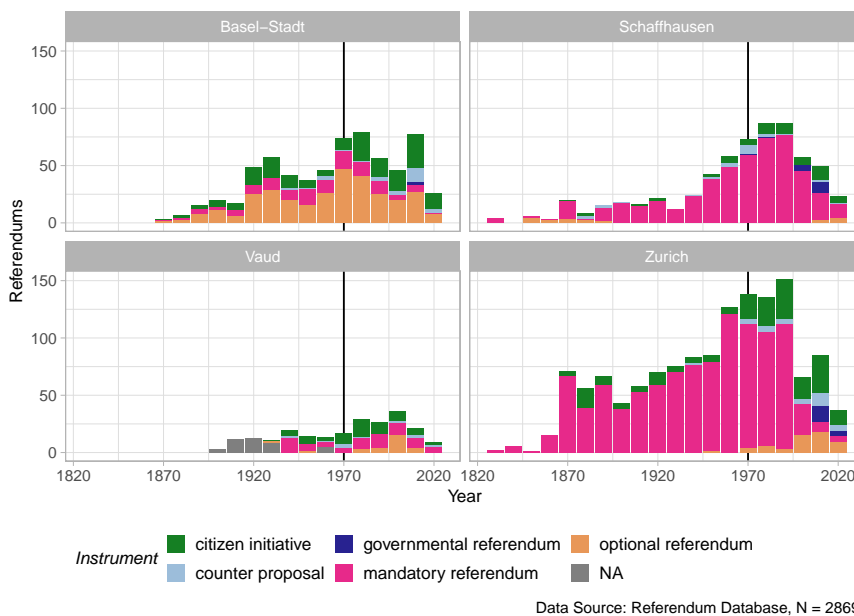


4.5 Types of referendum

Analysis of the new data is limited when it comes to the type of referendum that took place. The information is missing for most cantons. Only four cantons are coded to the point of being informative. Within these four cantons, different patterns are observable as to which referendum types were most frequently used.

Figure 4.6: Referendum types over time

Referendums aggregated by decade, referendum type and canton



A first interesting case is the one of the optional referendum. In Vaud, it was a rare but constant occurrence. Schaffhausen has seen two periods of optional referendum use, although even then it was rarely used. The first period was from the 1850s to the 1890s. The second period started again in the 2010s. It is not intuitively clear why there is such a long gap. Presumably it is due to changes in which direct democratic instruments were available to citizens. In contrast, the optional referendum is actually the most common

type of referendum in Basel-Stadt and has been for most of history. Only in the 2010s did citizen initiatives become more common than optional referendums.

Zurich represents a special case. In the RDB, optional referendums are recorded only from the 1970s onward. In the official data of the canton of Zurich, the first optional referendum took place in 1955, the second one in 1994. This discrepancy may be caused by changes to the financial referendum (Suter 2000). In 1951, the optional financial referendum was introduced. Subsequently, the spending thresholds below which the cantonal parliament could decide without being subject to an optional referendum were increased in 1964 and 1971. These institutional changes may have contributed to inconsistencies in the coding of optional referendums and require further investigation. In 1998, the mandatory financial referendum was abolished, thus any financial referendums are now optional, as is reflected in the increase of optional referendums.

The mandatory referendum is and was the most frequent referendum type for both Zurich and Schaffhausen. It is also present in Vaud and Basel-Stadt where it has seen constant but moderate use. No overview is available of the causes of these mandatory referendums, as the new data is not fully topic coded. At a glance, a common cause for mandatory referendums, similarly to the optional referendums, are state expenses.

Both Zurich and Basel-Stadt have a longstanding practice of citizen initiatives dating back to the 1870s, although the citizen initiative has been used more frequently in the last decades compared to when it was introduced. This fits into the general trend of more active instrument use by citizens.

5 Conclusion

With this 2025 Edition of the World of Referendums report series, we have provided a detailed overview of national-level referendums worldwide and Swiss cantonal referendums in 2025.

In Chapter 2, we have summarized national-level referendums worldwide and then compared acceptance rates and turnout. As in prior World of Referendums reports, we find that the referendum type greatly influences the probability of acceptance. Referendums launched by the government consistently show a higher rate of acceptance than referendums mandatory to launch because of constitutional requirements or launched by citizens through signature collection. Regarding turnout, we find large differences between countries and small within-country fluctuations compared to prior national-level votes.

In Chapter 3, we have summarized Swiss cantonal-level referendums. We find that a total of 97 referendums took place in Swiss cantons in 2025, with most of them being mandatory referendums, followed by citizen initiatives. Optional referendums, counter proposals and governmental referendums were rarer in comparison. In the cantons, the acceptance rates varied as well. Mandatory referendums were mostly accepted, whereas citizen initiatives were mostly turned down. Cantonal acceptance rates of the different referendum types were comparable to previous years. Regarding turnout, we find again that same-day national referendums increase turnout. Turnout as well was comparable to the average of previous years. Regarding the topics of cantonal referendums, we find a remarkable thematic range, indicating the extent to which Swiss cantons function as independent political forums and “laboratories of federalism” ([Stiftung für eidgenössische Zusammenarbeit 2026](#)).

In Chapter 4, we have discussed the recently added data on Swiss cantonal referendums prior to 1970. Most interestingly, we find different referendum patterns in different cantons. Overall, the 1970s and 1980s were indeed the “participative age” for cantonal direct democracy. Also in the long-term trend, the frequency of cantonal direct democratic votes seems to have decreased in recent years. Looking at turnout over a long time horizon, we find that turnout was higher in the 19th century and decreased substantially together with the increase in popular votes in the 1970s. At the same time, the turnout difference between national and cantonal referendums remains constant. Also when looking at longer time horizons, we again find that the cantons also differ widely in the types of referendums they hold, hinting at the different legal structures that govern the use of cantonal direct democracy.

What to expect in the World of Referendums in 2026? At time of writing, Thai voters had overwhelmingly approved the drafting of a new referendum on February 8th 2026 ([The Bangkok Post 2026](#)). At the same time, the citizens in Bangladesh voted for a new constitution within the framework of the “July Charter” on February 12th 2026 ([Hossain 2026](#)), citizens in Kazakhstan voted on a new constitution ([Light and Gordeyeva 2026](#)), and citizens in the Maldives voted against holding presidential and parliamentary elections simultaneously ([The Times of Maldives 2026](#)). In Italy, citizens voted on a referendum about rules regarding the judicial system ([Reuters 2026](#)). In Switzerland at the national level, votes have been held on taxation and financing climate action, among others ([SRF1 Abstimmungen 2026](#)). At the subnational level, we expect a similar number of cantonal referendums in Switzerland of around 100.

It remains to be seen whether the separatist referendums in the Canadian province of Alberta and in the French territory of New Caledonia will take place in 2026 ([Norguay 2026](#); [Wyeth 2026](#)). For Iran, Reza Pahlavi has announced a referendum in case he is put in charge of a transitional government ([The Economist 2026](#)). No later than 2027, Iceland is expected to hold a referendum on whether to re-open EU accession talks

([Leclerc and Macsai 2026](#)) and in Ukraine, any peace agreement involving territorial concessions to Russia would need to be approved by a referendum ([Baunov 2026](#)). The World of Referendums thus remains an intriguing one also in the upcoming months and years.

For further research, we recommend exploring the underlying mechanisms behind the trends and differences identified in this and previous World of Referendums reports.

Moving forward, the RDB team plans to further improve data quality and completeness. For the next edition of the World of Referendums report, we also plan to incorporate the Landsgemeinde votes in the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus.

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Collaborators at the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau at the University of Zurich from 2007 until today in alphabetical order include: Mayowa Alaye, Corsin Bisaz, Salim Brüggemann, Lukas Christen, Magdalena Despotov, Juri Ezzaini, Norina Frehner, Louis Gebistorf, Micha Germann, Andreas Glaser, Robin Gut, Joey Jüstrich, Kymani Koelewijn, Daniel Kübler, Beat Kuoni, Mara Labud, Irina Lehner, Sarah Lüthold, Fernando Mendez, Beat Müller, Joel Probst, Gabriela Rohner, Liana Sala, Uwe Serdült, Evren Somer, Gianluca Sorrentino, Anastasya Souslova, Milena Steiner, Andrin Walla, Yanina Welp, Jonathan Wheatley, and Jonas Wüthrich.

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Supplementary information

CRedit author statement

Mara Labud: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization. **Kymani Koelewijn:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - Original draft. **Gianluca Sorrentino:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - Original draft. **Robin Gut:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - Review & Editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Jonas Wüthrich:** Conceptualization, Software, Validation, Data Curation, Writing - Review & Editing.

Author biographies

Mara Labud is a masters' student of political science at the University of Zurich. She is interested in the interaction of law and politics, direct democracy, and policy implementation. <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-5914-4949>

Kymani Koelewijn is a master' student of Law at the University of Zurich. <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2214-9718>

Gianluca Sorrentino is a bachelors' student of Law at the University of Zurich. <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2482-003X>

Robin Gut is a PhD student and the project manager of the Referendum Database at the Centre for Democracy Studies at the University of Zurich. His research interests include referendums across democracies and autocracies, democratic innovations, and voting age 16. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7617-7748>

Jonas Wüthrich is a PhD student at the Centre for Democracy Studies at the University of Zurich and Data Lead of the Referendum Database. His PhD focuses on the relation between referendums and the quality of democracy as well as data management. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4548-1739>

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Data availability statement

The analysis was conducted in R version 4.5.3 Reassured Reassurer (R Core Team 2026) with R Studio Version 2026.1.1.403 Apple Blossom (Posit Team 2026). Referendum data comes from the rdb package (Brüggemann and Serdült 2023). Data was transformed and cleaned with tidyverse (Wickham et al. 2019), the plots were generated with ggplot2 (Wickham 2016) using the viridis color palette (Garnier et al. 2024). Further data for map making was gotten from (Federal Office of Topography swisstopo 2026).

The replication code for this report can be found at <https://gitlab.com/zdaarau/meta/rdb.report/-/tree/1b7c0a7370a331ae8e0a994b00a2aecodf2db08a/>.

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Appendix

The Referendum Database

Introduction to the RDB

The Referendum Database (RDB), formerly known as the czd Referendum Database, is hosted by the University of Zurich's Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau (ZDA), an academic research centre dedicated to the study of democracy in Switzerland and around the world.

The RDB is committed to the documentation of referendum results at the national and partly at the subnational level on a global scale, and in particular at the cantonal level for Switzerland. As of 2025, the RDB contains information on more than 3,000 referendums at the national level and 15,000 referendums at the subnational level in over 200 countries and territories worldwide since 1791. For Switzerland alone, the Referendum Database contains data on around 700 national referendums since 1793, and around 7,000 cantonal referendums since 1970. To this, we have newly added and analyzed an additional 5,000 cantonal referendums between 1831 and 1970. For most of these referendums, we have recorded the institutional context and characteristics such as the trigger, the question put forward to the voters, the turnout, the outcome, etc. In total, we collect around eighty data points for each referendum. The RDB can be accessed [here](#).¹ Alternatively, the R package `rdb` is offered to access the database's content directly.

History of the RDB

From 1994 to 2007, the Referendum Database was built up and developed at the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (czd) at the Department of Constitutional Law of the University of Geneva. The centre brought together researchers in law, political science and sociology studying direct democracy as institutions and political practice. The czd promoted research on direct democracy from a pluridisciplinary perspective and also provided information, advice, and counselling on various aspects to public authorities ([Auer and Bützer 2001](#)).

The Referendum Database was originally funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project *Dynamique et actualité de la démocratie directe dans un Etat fédéral* [grant no 393483](#) at the University of Geneva, directed by professors Andreas Auer and Hanspeter Kriesi. It was further developed with funds from the SNSF project *La démocratie communale en Suisse: vue générale, institutions et expériences dans les villes 1990-2000* [grant no 593664](#), and other projects. Cantonal data collection originally started as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) project *Kaleidoskop Volksrechte: Die Institutionen der direkten Demokratie in den Kantonen 1970-1997*, [grant no 53541](#) in 1998.

In fall 2007, the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy and the Referendum Database were migrated to the Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau. Maintenance and development of the RDB was defined as one of the founding purposes of the ZDA. In the following years, the database was further developed, extended, and improved; for example by closing gaps in the data on voting results in Swiss cantons or by automating the coding of international voting results. In 2018, the database was completely redesigned and made available in a new format.

Over the years, the RDB has served as the basis for more than eighty scientific publications on direct democracy in Switzerland and worldwide. To support these research efforts, the RDB strives to become the most comprehensive empirical collection on referendums worldwide. This is why we continue to improve the database and add

further data, especially from votes at the subnational (state and local) levels. At the same time, we are overhauling the RDB data structure to better encompass the historical and current legal foundations of referendums. The RDB is to provide accurate, up to date, and easily accessible data for referendum researchers worldwide.

Concurrently, we valorize the existing data in the form of annual reports and academic publications. This is why we initiated this World of Referendums (WoR) report series. In addition, we strive to regularly publish cutting edge academic research on referendums around the world.

Glossary:

For more details on the Referendum Database, please refer to the [RDB codebook](#) (Brüggemann 2023).

Acceptance rate The rate at which referendums were accepted within a given polity and timeframe. If four referendums were held and two were accepted, that is an acceptance rate of 50%.

Ballot date Date on which at least one referendum was held in a polity. In our analysis, we oftentimes analyze *ballot dates* instead of *referendums* in order not to artificially inflate the number of referendums in certain countries. In some constitutional referendums for example, each article of the constitution is voted on individually. This means that the vote on each article is counted as an individual referendum.

In general, differentiating between **referendums** and **ballot dates** entails a few tradeoffs:

- If we look at single **referendums**, the danger is that we count different response options to the same question as distinct events.
- If we only look at unique **ballot dates** per country, we solve this problem. However, we also lose distinct referendums that took place on the same date.

Ideally, we would include an additional variable in the *Referendum Database* denoting if referendums taking place on the same date belong together or if they are distinct. Until this linking variable has been implemented, we analyze ballot dates also in the Swiss context.

In Switzerland, the Federal Chancellery fixes four dates per year on which all national and subnational referendums are held ([Bundeskanzlei 2024](#)). Please note that we tally ballot dates for cantonal votes individually per canton. For example, when Aargau holds a cantonal vote on the same day as Zurich, this will be counted as two cantonal ballot dates in our database.

Canton (CH) Subnational entity of Switzerland. 26 cantons together form the Swiss Confederation ([Kley 2016](#)).

Citizen (CH) Enfranchisement in Swiss referendums varies over time and space. At the national level, women's suffrage was only introduced in 1971, voting age 18 in 1991. Today still, some citizens are excluded from voting because of a disability. Cantonal and even municipal enfranchisement rules can differ from the national rules. For example, Jura and Neuchâtel allow foreigners to vote in cantonal referendums; Glarus allows citizens to vote from the age of 16 ([Dermont 2021](#); [Poledna 2022](#)). Enfranchisement of Swiss national living abroad also varies between cantons.

Country In this report, we treat as "countries" those territorial units that hold referendums independently. Excluded from this are sub-national entities, such as federal states in the USA or cantons in Switzerland. Territories differ from federal states in that they may have a certain degree of autonomy, but they do not have the same extensive rights as federal states or provinces. As an example serves Greenland, which belongs to Denmark. Although Greenland is not a province in its own right,

it has far-reaching rights of self-determination. For example, the Greenlandic population can also decide on their own independence by referendum.

We rely on the classification into territorial units, based on the ISO 3166 standard that includes independent countries, territories and regions of geographical interest. Furthermore, ISO 3166-3 is used for historical countries that no longer exist.

Landsgemeinde (CH) The Landsgemeinde is a gathering of all enfranchised citizens of a canton to elect officials and pass laws. Some Swiss cantons have a Landsgemeinde tradition going back to the Middle Ages. Since the founding of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, almost all Landsgemeinden have been replaced with referendum democracy. Zug and Schwyz abolished the Landsgemeinde in 1848, Uri in 1928, Nidwalden in 1996, Appenzell Ausserrhoden in 1997, and Obwalden in 1998.

Today, only the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus still hold a yearly Landsgemeinde (Stadler 2021). In these two cantons, all enfranchised citizens meet once a year to vote on a wide range of issues. Elections and votes at cantonal level are held by a show of hands. The Landsgemeinde is regarded as the supreme authority of the respective cantons, although it does not replace parliament or the ballot box. The exact number of votes in favor of or against a proposal can only be estimated and cannot be determined precisely. This is also why these votes are excluded from this analysis.

Legal basis Several authors have identified the legal basis as an important aspect of referendums (Suksi 1993; Gallagher 1996; Setälä 1999; Altman 2017). In the RDB, **legal basis** can take on the following values:

- *non-official*: The referendum type has no legal basis.
- *ad-hoc*: The referendum type has a legal basis which was specifically created for it.
- *official*: The referendum type has a legal basis that wasn't specifically created for it.

Legislature period (CH) The legislature period is the length of a parliament before new elections are held. The National Council has a four-year legislature period. It begins and ends with the constituent sitting of the newly elected parliament, which is held in December after each national elections (The Swiss Parliament 2024).

Postal voting (CH) In Switzerland, postal voting was introduced in 1994 at the national level. Today, it is the most common form of voting (Serdült 2024, 212). It is estimated that the introduction of postal voting increased turnout by around 4 % (Luechinger, Rosinger, and Stutzer 2007).

Referendum instances In the RDB, we use the term **referendum** to refer to “[...] any popular vote on an issue of policy that is organized by the state or at least by a state-like entity, such as the authorities of a de facto state” (Mendez and Germann 2016, 144).

Regime type For regime type, we refer to the *Regimes of the World (RoW)* classification developed by the *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)* project (Coppedge et al. 2023) and (Lührmann, Tannenberg, and Lindberg 2018). This classification divides countries into the following four types, according to the competitiveness of access to power (polyarchy) and liberal principles:

- closed autocracy
- electoral autocracy
- electoral democracy
- liberal democracy

Additionally, we also use data compiled by Freedom House (2023) for robustness checks.

Topic The political topic that a referendum is held on. The topics are organized on a three-tier hierarchy which was developed together with [Swissvotes](#), the [Institute of Federalism of the University of Fribourg](#) and the [Section Politics of the Federal Statistical Office](#). More than one topic can be assigned to an individual referendum.

Turnout Share of registered voters participating in a referendum.

Trigger type The way the referendum is triggered:

- *automatic*: The referendum is triggered by a constitutional/legal requirement.
- *top down*: The referendum is triggered by an institution of the political elite like the monarch/president/government, the parliament, a territorial unit, the UN or another institution.
- *bottom up*: The referendum is triggered by citizen demand (e.g. a signature collection).

Type The institutional type of direct democracy which the referendum is an instance of ([Kriesi and Bernhard 2014](#)):

- *mandatory referendum*: A referendum that was automatically triggered by certain legal conditions, usually found in the constitution.
- *optional referendum*: A referendum on a law passed by parliament that came about because the required quorum of citizen opposition was met (usually a certain number of signatures) within a specified period after the law was passed. A further type of optional referendum is the *abrogative referendum*. An *abrogative referendum* is a vote of the electorate which may decide to either retain or repeal a law or decree that has been agreed and promulgated by the legislature and already implemented ([ACE Electoral Knowledge Network 2026](#))
- *governmental referendum*: A referendum launched by the government/executive or parliament/the legislative.
- *citizens' initiative*: A referendum launched by citizens, usually via a signature collection.
- *counter proposal*: A counter proposal by the government or parliament to a citizen's initiative.

At the cantonal level in Switzerland, the *referendum type* could be further differentiated ([Degen 2016](#); [Bätschmann 2017](#)):

- In addition to the *constitutional initiative*, some cantons also know the *legislative initiative*, in which the object of the initiative is a cantonal law.
- In addition, some cantons also provide for the *financial referendum*, and diverse forms of *administrative referendums*.

Further Figures:

Figure 5.1: Development of cantonal referendum frequency
10-year period, ballot issues per canton

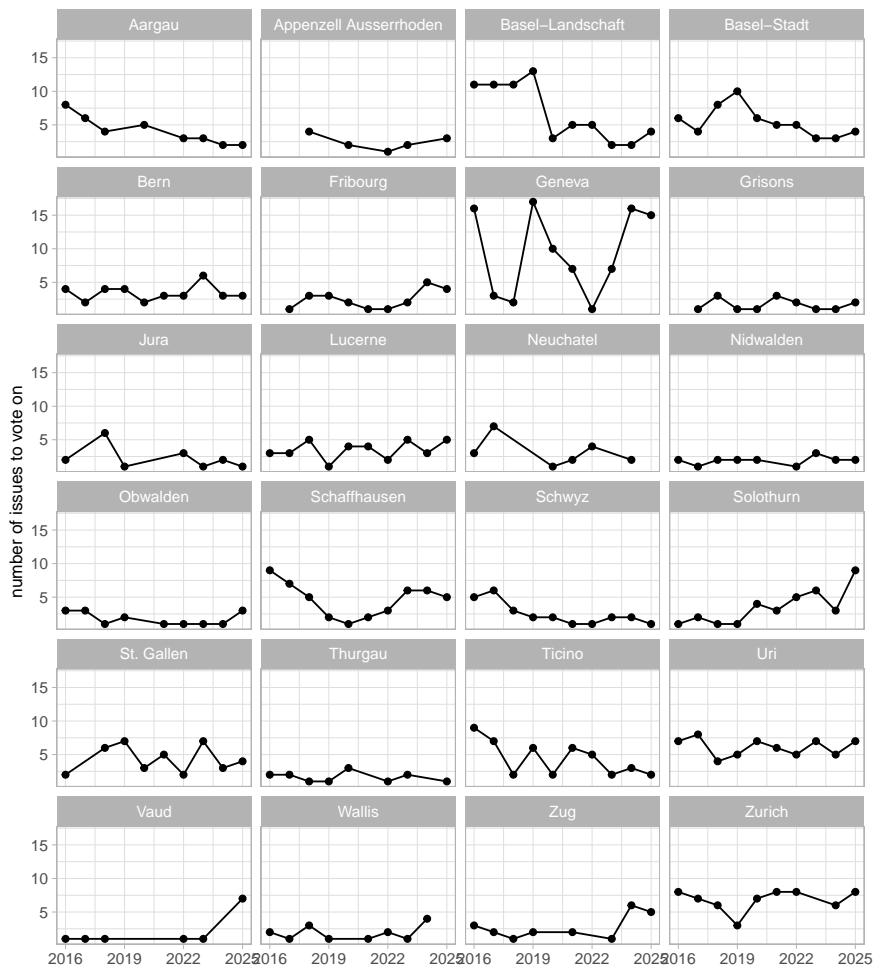


Figure 5.2: Changes in turnout in 10 years
 Showing yearly average turnout for every canton

