



## **Does direct democracy hurt immigrant minorities?: evidence from naturalization decisions in Switzerland**

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...that do it yourself government by citizens threatens the interests of minorities (Madison 1961). But despite considerable scholarly work on the topic, our understanding of how different forms of democratic government affect minority interests continues to be limited. Some

Jay, Gerber, and Louch 2002; Zimmerman and Pfander 1986). And while critics of direct democracy are quick to cite popular votes that have infringed upon the rights of minorities, supporters argue that such decisions are often simply window dressing because legislatures would have

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passed similar measures even in the absence of the direct democratic vote. As Matsusaka (2005, 201) concludes in a recent review,

Legislatures have harmed minorities, too—almost all Jim Crow laws throughout the South were brought about by legislatures—and elected representatives, not direct democracy, interned Japanese-American citizens during World War II. There is no convincing evidence— anecdotal or statistical—that minority rights are undermined by direct democracy with a greater regularity than by legislatures.

The reason for the absence of “convincing evidence” on the effects of direct democracy on minority outcomes is that identifying the causal effect of direct democracy

right to permanently stay in the host country, and, as correlational studies suggest, access to better jobs and higher wages (e.g., OECD 2011). Quasi-experimental evidence also shows that naturalization propels the political and social integration of immigrants (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Pietrantuono 2015, 2017).

In Switzerland, citizenship applications of immigrants are decided by the municipality in which the immigrant resides. Municipalities use two main types of regimes to vote on naturalization applications: direct democracy, in which citizens vote on the applications using referendums, and representative democracy, in which elected legislators vote on the applications in the municipality council. This configuration has generated a wealth of data that enable us to examine whether immigrant minorities fare better or worse if their naturalization re-