

# Global evidence in local debates: the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in Swiss direct-democratic debates on school policy

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## Abstract

This article analyses the use of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other evidence in educational policy discourse in the context of direct-democratic votes in Switzerland. The results of a quantitative content analysis show that PISA is used by all actors to support a wide range of policy measures and ideological positions. Other evidence, however, is only used to support single specific policy positions. These findings demonstrate the ubiquity of PISA. The article discusses these results in view of the question of whether the incorporation of evidence into policy debates contributes to informed discourse.

**key words** direct democracy • policy debates • evidence use • PISA

## Introduction

Education policy, traditionally considered the domain of national or subnational decision making, has in recent years become an internationalised issue. Previous research has shown that a key driver of this new development is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and its evidence-based approach to policy making: the OECD provides guidance to policy makers through the production of reports, studies and indicators, which leads to a convergence of national educational policy (Bieber and Martens, 2011; Grek, 2014; Martens, 2007; Sellar and Lingard, 2013a; 2013b; 2014). In particular, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is used by governments and an emerging 'expertocracy' (Grek, 2013) to prescribe national policy reforms. PISA allows policy makers to frame policy decisions based on evidence about 'what works' rather than based on ideology. Hence, PISA, so it is argued, has led to a 'post-ideological moment in educational policy' (Sellar and Lingard, 2013a: 479).

This article challenges this view by asking the question of how PISA and other evidence are used in highly ideological policy debates. It argues that a high use of PISA in policy debates indicates that a universally applicable

study, such as PISA, lends itself to be used to support a wide range of ideological and political positions. Thus, a high use of PISA is not an indication of post-ideological framing of education policy making, but rather of the ubiquity of PISA. To discuss and illustrate this argument, the article examines how PISA and other pieces of evidence are used to support arguments in policy debates in the context of Swiss subnational, direct-democratic votes on a variety of school policy issues. In a direct-democratic polity, the ultimate decision-making authority with respect to public policy lies with the majority of citizens. It is thus not possible for governments or experts 'to prescribe' policies based on evidence about 'what works'. Rather, evidence can flow into the debates preceding the votes on policy measures. In so doing, evidence may reach voters and inform them about the policy measure at stake and, eventually, contribute to a more informed debate. Hence, this article treats evidence-based policy as a rhetorical format rather than a guide for policy makers, and focuses on how such rhetoric is used (Wesselink et al, 2014). Using a quantitative content analysis of media articles and government documents of 103 cantonal votes between 2000 and 2012 in 21 different Swiss cantons on a variety of school policy issues, the article compares the use of PISA with the use of other educational evidence, in particular evaluations. The results of the empirical analysis show that PISA is frequently used to substantiate a wide range of policy measures and positions, not only by government officials, but equally by actors opposing governmental reforms. Other evidence that treats specific context-related questions, however, is only used to support single, specific policy positions.

The article first presents its theoretical approach to the use of evidence and outlines the nature of PISA as globalising evidence. It then introduces the context of direct-democratic decision making in the Swiss federal system before describing the methodological approach of quantitative content analysis. After the presentation of the findings, it discusses them from the perspective of an interpretive approach to public policy.

### **Evidence-based policy as a rhetorical format**

Evidence-based policy making designates the effort to implement policy based on evidence about 'what works' rather than policy based on ideology and politics. Evidence-based policy making was originally advocated in Great Britain by the incoming New Labour government in the late 1990s and has become increasingly popular in different countries and policy fields. It has also brought about a renewed attention in academia to the relationship between evidence and policy making (for example, Davies et al, 2000; Frey and Ledermann, 2010; Nutley et al, 2007; Pawson, 2006; Sanderson, 2002). Most of the evidence-based policy making literature is based on a rational-technical view of policy making and focuses on how evidence influences policy outputs, either through direct integration of evidence in the policy making process or through a more indirect influence of evidence on the perceptions of policy makers. This 'post-ideological approach to policy making' suggests that political debates may be settled through invoking evidence, as they increasingly revolve around technical issues and not around different

ideological stances (Boswell, 2009, 4). This article, however, draws on a different notion of evidence use by building on an interpretive view that treats policy making as a process of argumentation and a constant struggle between competing discourses (Fischer, 2003; Majone, 1989; Shulock, 1999; Stone, 2002). In this view, the role of evidence is to offer support for a certain discourse and ideological position, and not to provide readymade policy solutions. Such focus on how 'evidence-based policy' is used as a rhetorical format (Pearce et al, 2014; Wesselink et al, 2014) has long been neglected in the evidence-based policy making literature, but has become increasingly important in an era of a global rhetorical commitment to evidence-based policy making (Hulme and Hulme, 2012, 477). It assumes that the rhetoric use of evidence also plays an important political function (Boswell, 2009). Evidence can lend authority to a claim and signify rational decision making by creating an 'effect of truth' (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2007, 3). In addition, by providing information on the policy in question, for example, in the form of insights into potential outcomes of the policy, evidence may eventually contribute to a more informed debate (Shulock, 1999; Valovirta, 2002).

In the field of education, evidence-based policy making has become an increasingly dominant discourse in recent years (Biesta, 2007; 2010; Davies, 1999; Slavin, 2002; Wiseman et al, 2010). A main driver of this development has been the OECD through the production of educational evidence and the provision of policy recommendations to national policy makers. In particular the OECD's PISA studies are considered an important part of the evidence-based policy making agenda in the field of education (Martens, 2007). Besides PISA, there exists other major types of policy-relevant evidence, in particular evaluations and the findings of educational research (Fitz-Gibbon, 2000).

### **PISA: globalising evidence**

PISA is an assessment of the competences of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics and science conducted by the OECD every three years. With a clear focus on how students can apply their knowledge to real-life situations, PISA aims at measuring to what extent education systems prepare students for 'full participation in modern societies' (OECD, 2014, 1). PISA does not only measure, but it has a clear policy orientation (Grek, 2009, 27–8): first, the OECD provides explicit policy solutions to national policy makers in the form of recommendations and the identification of best practices (for example, OECD, 2004). Second, the comparative nature of PISA and its practice to establish rankings implicitly suggests adopting policy solutions from best performing systems. This has arguably led to a convergence of education policy in participating countries (Grek, 2014; Sellar and Lingard, 2013b; Wiseman et al, 2010). This convergence and the geographic scaling up (Ansell and Torfing, 2015) of PISA to include a large part of countries have resulted in a new global space of educational policy making (Sellar and Lingard, 2014). Previous studies have argued that in this global space policy making is no longer 'geographically or politically bounded but is instead bounded by the extent of the legitimated evidence used to support one decision or policy

versus another' (Wiseman et al, 2010, 18). The present article challenges this view that the use of PISA leads to non-political policy making based on evidence and to 'post-ideological framing in education policy' (Sellar and Lingard, 2013a, 479). It argues instead that PISA lends itself to be used in policy debates to substantiate a wide range of ideological and political positions. A high use of PISA in education policy debates is thus not an indication of non-ideological policy making, but merely indicates that PISA can be used to substantiate any type of policy position.

There are several reasons why PISA lends itself to policy makers to substantiate policy decisions in debates: first, the policy orientation of PISA is based on the assumption that the global differences in PISA results are primarily attributable to educational policies. This line of thinking, also referred to as 'PISA reasoning' (Feniger and Lefstein, 2014), remains prevalent among policy makers although it has been widely criticised (Alexander, 2012a; 2012b; Coffield, 2012): while the PISA studies show factors that correlate with good student performance, they do not claim causality between PISA test results and educational policy. Indeed, extra-educational factors related to culture, wealth, demography or equity may also correlate with PISA results (Alexander, 2012a, 9). Because PISA results do not assess outcomes of specific educational policy measures, they leave much room for interpretation as to which specific policy measures lead to the results. Hence, PISA may be used to support arguments in favour of or against a wide range of policy measures. Second, in order to be persuasive, evidence requires 'an aura of impartiality' (Pearce et al, 2014, 162) which can be achieved through quantification or by using evidence coming from a renowned, ostensibly neutral organisation. PISA responds to both these criteria: the OECD has a reputation as a producer of quality evidence (Ettelt et al, 2012, 501), and PISA results are presented in the form of quantitative indicators and league tables. PISA, thus, gives the impression to express overly complex mechanisms in simple numbers. This simplicity makes PISA easy to use in political debates. Third, PISA has received a large media attention, resulting in a high salience of PISA. It can be assumed that such high publicity is also reflected in a frequent use of PISA in policy debates. In summary, it is to be expected that in debates on school policy, PISA is the most frequently used evidence. PISA is expected to be used to support arguments for and against a wide range of different policy measures, not only by governmental officials, but equally by the camp opposing governmental policy. Other evidence that treats specific, context-bound questions, however, is only used to support single, specific policy positions.

### **The context: Swiss direct-democratic votes on school policy**

I study the use of evidence in policy debates using the example of debates preceding Swiss direct-democratic votes on school policy. In the Swiss direct-democratic system, policy decisions may be taken by a majority of citizens

through a vote. These votes are issue-specific and involve two camps: one takes the governmental position, the other opposes it. The camps represent non-formalised 'ad hoc issue coalitions', composed of a variety of different groups of actors such as parties, civil society organisations, stakeholder groups or experts (Bernhard, 2012). Before the vote, the issues to be voted on and the positions of both sides are publicly debated. The most important channels for the public debate are the mass media, in particular daily newspapers, as well as an information booklet provided by the government (Bonfadelli and Friemel, 2012, 173–4). The government information booklet is developed by the administration and aims at informing the public and explaining the government's stance on the issue, but it also informs about opposing positions. It thus contains the arguments of the government, but also of other politicians opposing governmental policy. The press includes news reports, editorials and letters to the editors, and contains arguments of a variety of actors: the government, members of parliament, party leaders, stakeholders and representatives of civil society, experts, journalists and citizens. Previous research has shown that in the context of Swiss direct-democratic votes the press reports in a balanced and substantive way, and voters are provided with information and a diversity of arguments that allow them to make decisions in line with their predispositions (Kriesi, 2012, 238–40; Marquis et al, 2011; Tresch, 2012).

In the Swiss federal system, the member states, the cantons, which are relatively small in terms of area and population, have large competences. In the field of education, the main competence lies with the cantons. Consequently, a large majority of votes on school policy take place at the level of the cantons. Since after the turn of the millennium, numerous and significant reforms of the Swiss school system have been initiated. Previous research has shown that the first PISA study was decisive in triggering these reforms (Bieber, 2010a; 2010b; Bieber and Martens, 2011; Criblez, 2008, 278–81; Osterwalder and Weber, 2004). However, many reforms were contested and needed the approval of a popular vote. In particular the Swiss People's Party (SVP), a nationalist-populist party, opposed reforms and, at the same time, developed issue ownership for education (Udris, 2012, 28). As a consequence, education became a salient and contested area, and votes on educational issues increased in the second half of the first decade of the new millennium. The most important policy issues with votes taking place in several cantons in the period under examination included: an inter-cantonal agreement to harmonise the cantonal school systems, which and how many languages to be taught in primary schools, speaking Swiss dialect in kindergarten, financing private schools, grades in primary school, combining kindergarten and the first years of primary school into a new school-entry level, introduction of school managers and increased autonomy of schools.

This context provides an excellent basis for the analysis of the use of evidence in debates: first, the high number of votes allows for an analysis across policy issues, cantons and time. Second, use of evidence to substantiate positions can be expected, as the substantiating use of evidence is most likely in highly contested areas (Boswell,

2009, 62). Third, most debates oppose the cantonal governments to an opposition from a nationalist-populist force. According to existing literature, the governments are expected to use PISA to legitimise their policy decisions. If PISA can be used to support any ideological and political position, as this article claims, the camp opposing the government also uses PISA to substantiate its position. This is particularly revealing since the Swiss People's Party generally opposes internationalisation and the integration of Switzerland into any type of 'global space' as an alleged loss of sovereignty and identity (Afonso et al, 2010, 568).

Swiss direct-democratic debates on school policy may be considered as an extreme case for the use of international evidence in policy debates: due to the direct- democratic system, participation in policy debates is broader than in other contexts. In addition, in other policy fields there may not be a dominant international study as there is with PISA in the field of education. The generalisation of the present study's findings to other contexts and policy fields, thus, may not be easily made. However, extreme cases are useful to reveal rich information about the phenomena studied (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gerring, 2007).

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach is based on a quantitative content analysis of the official governmental information and newspaper coverage of all Swiss cantonal direct-democratic campaigns on school policy between 2000 and 2012, a total of 103 votes in 21 different cantons. More specifically, I content-analysed the governmental information booklet of each vote, as well as all newspaper items that mention the issue of the vote in the newspaper with the highest circulation in the respective canton and in the two major national newspapers two months prior to each vote. Overall, 5,816 newspaper items from 26 different newspapers and 96 government information booklets are included in the analysis, a total of 5,912 items (that is, the unit of analysis).<sup>1</sup>

The data-coding process followed a three-step procedure. First, all 5,912 items were manually coded to capture important characteristics such as type (that is, booklet or news item), author or date. In a second step, I conducted a computer-assisted search of all items with keywords relating to evidence (for example, evaluation, study, PISA, analysis, evidence, scientific) to detect items containing evidence. In a third step, I manually coded these items and counted the amount of arguments backed by evidence per type of actor, whether evidence is used in favour or against the issue at stake and what type of evidence is used. An argument is defined as the justification of why a voter should vote for or against a policy issue. The following example illustrates an argument backed by evidence: 'A study by the OECD affirms that private schools improve school quality. That is why we approve of the initiative "Variety of education for everybody"' (Government information booklet of the initiative 'Variety of education for everybody', 30 November 2008, Canton of Basel-Landschaft, 12). In this study, I have only included instances in which concrete evidence is used, that is, the study or its author is named. Consistent with an interpretive view to

evidence use, I do not make a judgement on the quality of evidence: whatever actors involved in a debate consider being evidence is included as evidence.<sup>2</sup>

In order to assess reliability, 100 items out of those that were found to contain evidence were randomly selected using the random number generator of the software R and coded by a second person. Percent agreement was 90.8 per cent and Cohen's Kappa 0.90 (CI: 0.85-0.96), which is a very good reliability score. The coded data was quantitatively analysed using frequencies and Pearson's chi-squared tests for categorical data to test for distribution.

## Findings

The presentation of the results starts with an overview of the use of evidence in debates of the direct-democratic votes under examination. The article then examines the variety of policy measures and positions backed by the different studies before presenting what actors use PISA to substantiate their positions.

### *The use of evidence in debates on school policy: an overview*

The use of evidence in direct-democratic school policy debates is, in general, rare. Evidence is used in only 228 (3.9 per cent) of all 5,912 items to substantiate a total of 299 arguments. Nonetheless, a majority of votes, namely 62 (or 60.2 per cent) of the 103 votes, contain at least an argument backed with evidence. A total of 40 different studies are used to substantiate policy positions. Table 1 shows all the concrete studies that are used in two or more items. The remaining 26 studies are only used once and are not listed in the table. Among the evidence used, PISA takes a largely predominant role: 61.0 per cent of the items that contain evidence refer to PISA to back an argument. The second most used evidence is a Swiss evaluation 'EDK Ost 4 bis 8', an evaluation of a pilot project of a new school entry level that combines kindergarten and the first classes of primary school.

There are only two international studies used – PISA and an OECD working paper, which is also based on PISA data. This confirms the leading role of PISA and of the OECD as provider of evidence in the field of education. All other used evidence is Swiss made. Most of the used evidence are Swiss evaluation reports; the list also includes the results of two basic research projects, one expert opinion and one monitoring report. All of the used evaluations deal with pilot projects or single, specific policy measures that have been introduced in some of the cantons. Common to these evaluations is that they discuss the effectiveness of the policy measures at stake, as well as the context factors that may lead to successful implementation or failure of the policy. They thus provide information on the policy measures at stake that could be used in a debate.



**Table 1.** Studies used in direct-democratic campaigns.

Name of evidence	Amount of items containing evidence (% of total amount of items containing evidence)
PISA <sup>1</sup>	139 (61.0%)
Evaluation 'EDK-Ost 4 bis 8' <sup>2</sup>	39 (17.1%)
School accountability, autonomy, choice and the equity of student achievement. OECD Education Working Papers No 14	4 (1.8%)
Report Prof. Dr. Georges Lüdi, University of Zurich <sup>3</sup>	4 (1.8%)
Evaluation 'School project 21' <sup>4</sup>	6 (2.6%)
Evaluation 'Pilot project school entry level' <sup>5</sup>	3 (1.3%)
The school system of Geneva <sup>6</sup>	3 (1.3%)
Repetition of classes: influencing factors, effectiveness, consequences <sup>7</sup>	4 (1.8%)
Evaluation 'Dealing with German in elementary school' <sup>8</sup>	2 (0.9%)
Evaluation 'Responsibilities and resources of autonomous and semi-autonomous schools in Zurich' <sup>9</sup>	2 (0.9%)
Evaluation 'Teaching French in junior and senior secondary school' <sup>10</sup>	2 (0.9%)
Ready for school? Reading, vocabulary, mathematics and social competences upon school entry <sup>11</sup>	2 (0.9%)
When high-achieving classmates put students at a disadvantage: reference group effects at the transition to secondary schooling <sup>12</sup>	2 (0.9%)
The increasing offer of special needs education. A cantonal comparison <sup>13</sup>	2 (0.9%)

<sup>1</sup> Includes all references to all PISA studies

<sup>2</sup> Includes a formative and a summative evaluation report: Moser and Bayer (2010) and Vogt et al. (2010). Reports in German.

<sup>3</sup> The cantonal government commissioned an expert opinion report. This report is not publicly available.

<sup>4</sup> Büeler et al. (2001). Report in German.

<sup>5</sup> Stamm (2003). Report in German.

<sup>6</sup> Service de la recherche en éducation (2001). Report in French.

<sup>7</sup> Bless et al. (2005). Book in French.

<sup>8</sup> Simon et al. (2010). Report in German.

<sup>9</sup> Rhyn et al. (2002). Report in German.

<sup>10</sup> Sauer (2004). Report in German.

<sup>11</sup> Moser et al. (2005). Report in German.

<sup>12</sup> Trautwein and Baeriswyl (2007). Journal article in German.

<sup>13</sup> Häfeli and Walther-Müller (2005). Book in German.

### *The variety of policy positions supported by PISA and other evidence*

For what votes and policy positions is evidence used? Table 2 again shows the evidence that was used in two or more items, this time indicating the number of votes that contain the evidence, as well as the proportion of arguments backed by the evidence in favour of or against the vote. The amount of votes that contain the evidence (second column in Table 2) is an indicator for the variety of policy measures backed by a concrete study.<sup>3</sup>



**Table 2.** Use of different types of evidence and side of the campaign

Name of evidence	Amount of votes	pro	contra	Total amount of arguments
PISA <sup>1</sup>	51	57.9%	42.1%	164
Evaluation 'EDK-Ost 4 bis 8'	6*	54.7%	45.3%	64
School accountability, autonomy, choice and the equity of student achievement. OECD Education Working Papers No 14	2*	100.0%	0.0%	10
Report Prof. Dr. Georges Lüdi, University of Zurich	1	0.0%	100.0%	9
Evaluation 'School project 21'	3*	28.6%	71.4%	7
Evaluation 'Pilot project school entry level'	1	33.3%	66.7%	6
The school system of Geneva	1	100.0%	0.0%	5
Repetition of classes: influencing factors, effectiveness, consequences	2*	100.0%	0.0%	4
Evaluation 'Dealing with German in elementary school'	1	100.0%	0.0%	2
Evaluation 'Responsibilities and resources of autonomous and semi-autonomous schools in Zurich'	1	100.0%	0.0%	2
Evaluation 'Teaching French in junior and senior secondary school'	1	100.0%	0.0%	2
Ready for school? Reading, vocabulary, mathematics and social competences upon school entry	1	0.0%	100.0%	2
When high-achieving classmates put students at a disadvantage: reference group effects at the transition to secondary schooling	2*	0.0%	100.0%	2
The increasing offer of special needs education. A cantonal comparison	2	0.0%	100.0%	2

\* More than one vote that concern the same policy issue, either in different cantons, at different points in time or due to the need of two votes to approve the same issue (e.g. need to change the constitution and the law).

With the exception of PISA, evidence is used to support or combat the introduction of one single policy measure. The 'EDK Ost 4 bis 8' evaluation, for example, is exclusively used for votes on the introduction of the new school entry level with mixed age groups in different cantons. PISA, however, is deployed to back a range of policy measures: PISA is used in a total of 51 different votes on issues as diverse as speaking Swiss dialect in kindergarten, financing private schools, grades in primary school, or the choice of languages to be taught in primary schools. The only other evidence that is used to back more than one policy measure is the study by Häfeli and Walther- Müller (2005), which is used to back arguments for two different policy measures. Hence, the findings confirm that PISA is used for a wide range of different policy measures, whereas other evidence is only used in the context of one policy measure. In a next step, the variety of positions supported by the evidence was analysed by means of the proportion of arguments using the evidence for or against the policy issues at stake (remaining columns of Table 2). The findings show that the two most frequently used studies, the PISA studies and the EDK-

Ost 4 bis 8 evaluations, were used almost equally by the pro and contra sides of the votes. Two other evaluations, the evaluation of the 'School project 21' and the evaluation of the 'Pilot project school entry level' were used two thirds of the time by actors adhering to the governmental position and one third of the time by actors opposing the government's stance. All other studies are used only by one side. These findings confirm that PISA is used to support arguments for and against a wide range of different policy positions. Other evidence, however, with the exception of one evaluation study, is predominantly used to support one single specific policy position. The exceptional case can be explained by the nature of the findings of this evaluation: the 'EDK-Ost 4 bis 8' evaluation of the piloting a new school entry level includes, in fact, two parts, namely, a formative process evaluation (Vogt et al, 2010) and a summative evaluation, assessing the competences of children using a quasi-experimental design (Moser and Bayer, 2010). The results of these evaluations are ambiguous: while the process of introducing this new school entry level has been successful, the competences of children have not significantly improved as compared to the old system. The authors of both reports argue in a common conclusion that: 'The lack of a clear statement in favour or against one of the models may be unsatisfactory for decision makers. However, the results provide new insights in the debate on the school entry level' (Vogt et al, 2010, 92). This conclusion can be seen as an indication that evaluations that treat context-specific questions may contribute to a more informed debate.

### *PISA: everybody's evidence*

We have seen that across votes PISA is used in debates by both, the pro and the contra camp. In a next step, I examined whether both opposing camps use PISA in the same vote. Therefore, all votes using PISA were analysed as to whether they contain arguments backed with PISA for and against the issue at stake. In 26 of the 51 votes containing PISA, PISA was used to substantiate positions by both sides. In the other 25 votes, PISA was only used by one side. However, this was not necessarily the governmental side of the vote: in 22 out of the 25 votes PISA was used against the governmental recommendation. PISA is thus used by both, actors adhering to the governmental position and by actors opposing governmental policy.

To examine this result in more detail, an analysis of what actors use PISA relative to other actors and relative to other evidence, as well as the channels through which evidence enters the debates was made. In the votes under examination, most arguments using evidence come from citizens (30 per cent), followed by arguments from members of parties (other than members of the executive) (25 per cent), members of cantonal governments, mostly the cantonal ministers of education (15 per cent), stakeholders such as teachers (13 per cent), and journalists (11 per cent). Experts account for the fewest evidence-based arguments (5 per cent). This result is, however, limited, as

only arguments using evidence were counted, not those arguments that do not refer to evidence. Thus, the total amount of arguments is unknown. Experts, for example, may, in general, be less involved in direct-democratic debates than other actors. In addition, the high number of citizens using evidence may be due to coding: when authors of letters to the editor did not indicate their affiliation to a party or to a stakeholder group, they were coded as citizens.

In a next step, the proportion of arguments backed with PISA to those backed with other evidence was analysed per type of actor. The results in Table 3 indicate that members of cantonal governments and stakeholders, such as teachers, use PISA disproportionately often as opposed to other evidence. This confirms that PISA is an important instrument for governments to legitimise reforms as opposed to other evidence. However, in absolute terms, it is not government officials, but rather citizens and other politicians such as members of parliaments who are responsible for a high use of PISA. These two groups of actors introduce together more than half of the PISA-based arguments into the policy debates. Hence, PISA is not only an instrument of governments to legitimise policy decisions, but it is taken up by a wide range of actors to substantiate their positions.

**Table 3.** Arguments backed with PISA and other evidence by actors

Actors	Amount of evidence-based arguments	
	PISA	Other evidence
Citizens	50 (55.6%)	40 (44.4%)
Members of parties <sup>a</sup>	39 (51.3%)	37 (48.7%)
Members of governments	32 (71.1%)	13 (28.9%)
Stakeholders	28 (70.0%)	12 (30.0%)
Journalists	9 (27.3%)	24 (72.7%)
Experts	6 (40.0%)	9 (60.0%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>164 (54.8%)</b>	<b>135 (45.2%)</b>

Note.  $\chi^2 = 20.383$ , df = 5

\*\*p = .001

<sup>a</sup> Members of parties other than members of governments. This category mostly consists of members of parliaments, but also includes a few non-elected party members.

As another indication of how important an instrument PISA is for governments to substantiate policy decisions, the proportion of evidence-based arguments in governmental information brochures as opposed to newspapers was analysed, as the official governmental information booklet is the main information channel for cantonal governments. The use of PISA is, therefore, expected to be high in this channel if government officials use PISA to legitimise reforms. The results show that evidence, in general, is used significantly more often in the official governmental information booklet than in newspapers. Arguments supported by evidence were found in 19.8 per cent of all official government information booklets, but in only 3.6 per cent of the newspaper items ( $X^2$  (1, N =

5912) = 66.83,  $p < 0.001$ ). However, members of Swiss cantonal governments do not use PISA in their official information on school votes to legitimise their policy decisions disproportionately more often than other evidence ( $X^2(1, N=299) = 0.005, p = 0.94$ ).

## Conclusions

The body of research focusing on how evidence-based policy is used as a rhetorical format is growing. The present contribution joins in the debate by means of a quantitative content analysis of the use of evidence in governmental information and newspaper coverage in the context of over a hundred Swiss cantonal direct- democratic votes on school policy. The analysis confirms the predominant role of the OECD as a producer of evidence and the role of PISA in education policy debates. The comparison of the use of PISA in school policy debates with the use of other evidence, in particular evaluations of specific policy measures or projects, shows that PISA is used to support arguments for and against a wide range of different policy measures, while other evidence is only used to support single specific policy positions. PISA is not only used by government officials, but by all actors to support their – often opposing – political and ideological positions.

By focusing on the rhetoric use of PISA, this analysis has painted a more complex picture of how PISA is used than previous literature, which sees PISA as indicative of a post-ideological moment in educational policy making, suggests. While the results of the present study demonstrate the ubiquity of PISA in educational policy discourse, they also indicate that policy debates remain highly ideological despite a high use of PISA. An interpretive view on the use of evidence suggests that evidence may be a contributor to an informed discourse by elevating ‘the level of the debate with a compelling, evidence-based presentation’ of different positions (Shulock, 1999, 240). However, whether the rhetoric use of evidence actually leads to more informed debates or whether it remains ‘empty rhetoric’ cannot be answered with the present research. While the quantitative approach of this article made it possible to include a large quantity of votes and, thus, to demonstrate the variety of different issues backed with PISA, a qualitative analysis of arguments backed by evidence would be necessary to analyse the influence of the use of evidence on discourse. Therefore, I would propose at least two directions for further research.

First, I would suggest as a hypothesis for future studies that PISA may not contribute as much to an informed policy discourse as other types of evidence do: PISA fails to provide information on the specific policy measures debated since PISA is restricted to entire national and cantonal school systems and not to single specific policy measures. However, other evidence, in particular evaluations, have the potential to contribute to discourse by providing information on the policy in question; for example, in the form of insights into potential outcomes or constraints of policy implementation, or by illustrating important context factors.

Second, an interpretive view of evidence-based policy making also implies that evidence itself necessarily reflects

certain ideological positions. PISA, arguably, also carries an ideological message; for example, through its strong emphasis on linking schooling to labour markets and to economic competitiveness. Whether these ideological messages inherent to PISA are disclosed and discussed in school policy debates and how PISA recommendations are modified and reframed in the process of policy translation (Mukhtarov, 2014) remains to be examined.

Overall, I would argue that for the use of evidence in debates to be a contributor to an informed discourse, the evidence must not only provide information on the policy at stake, but the debate must also include a discussion of different ideological interpretations of the evidence as promoted by an argumentative approach to public policy (Fischer, 2003; Fischer and Forester, 1993; Majone, 1989). Only when the debate illuminates different interpretations of evidence according to existing value systems can the use of evidence aid voters in taking an informed decision and contribute to democracy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Only votes on mandatory education are included, excluding vocational and higher education. Votes that do not include policy issues but only focus on construction (for example, the construction of new schools) were excluded. The list of all votes was taken from the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (C2D database: [www.c2d.ch/votes.php?table=votes](http://www.c2d.ch/votes.php?table=votes)). Only French- and German-speaking cantons were included; the Italian-speaking canton, Ticino, was not included in the analysis. I considered the newspaper with the highest circulation in every canton, except in four cantons where two newspapers have similar circulations, and in bilingual cantons where I selected one newspaper for each language. The number of government information booklets is lower than the number of votes, because in one information booklet all votes of the same date are described. It is possible that several votes on school policy may take place on the same day.

<sup>2</sup> The codebook can be obtained from the author for further information.

<sup>3</sup> The amount of votes does not correspond one-to-one to the number of policy measures – several votes on the same policy issue can take place in different cantons, at different points in time or due to a need to change legislation at the level of the constitution and the law. A high number of votes that contain the same evidence is, nevertheless, a close indicator for a variety of different policy measures that are substantiated by the evidence.

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