

MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY



EDITORIAL

Modern representative democracy is at stake. The challenges come from all sides: on one hand from the globalised economy, which transcends in many ways the reach of national democracies, and on the other hand from autocratic and populist movements trying to undermine the rule of law and the separation of powers. In order to strengthen representative democracy, more and more countries have introduced elements of participative and direct democracy into their national, regional and local government systems. Over the past years a rise in popular votes in countries all over the world has been observed. The development towards a more participative democracy has perhaps been the most comprehensive in Switzerland. Thanks to its use of the initiative and referendum process, Switzerland has become an interesting partner and reference case in discussions about modern democracy.

Active citizenship through participation in referendums and initiatives has an impact on the country itself and it also shapes the image of Switzerland. This brochure provides an overview of the history, the instruments as well as the challenges of modern direct democracy in Switzerland. It is complemented by an exhibition shown by official Swiss representations abroad. The combination of this brochure with the exhibition serves as the basis for a dialogue on different forms of democracy. It offers an interactive opportunity to learn and discuss the key elements of a direct democratic process within a representative democracy.

“Raise your hand!” This is the most traditional way of making your vote count. Today most people use postal votes instead of going to the polls. Some cantons have recently introduced electronic voting to a limited extent.

Image: “Voting hands”,
Presence Switzerland

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DEMOCRACY – AN UNFINISHED JOURNEY

THE BIRTH OF A NEW SYSTEM

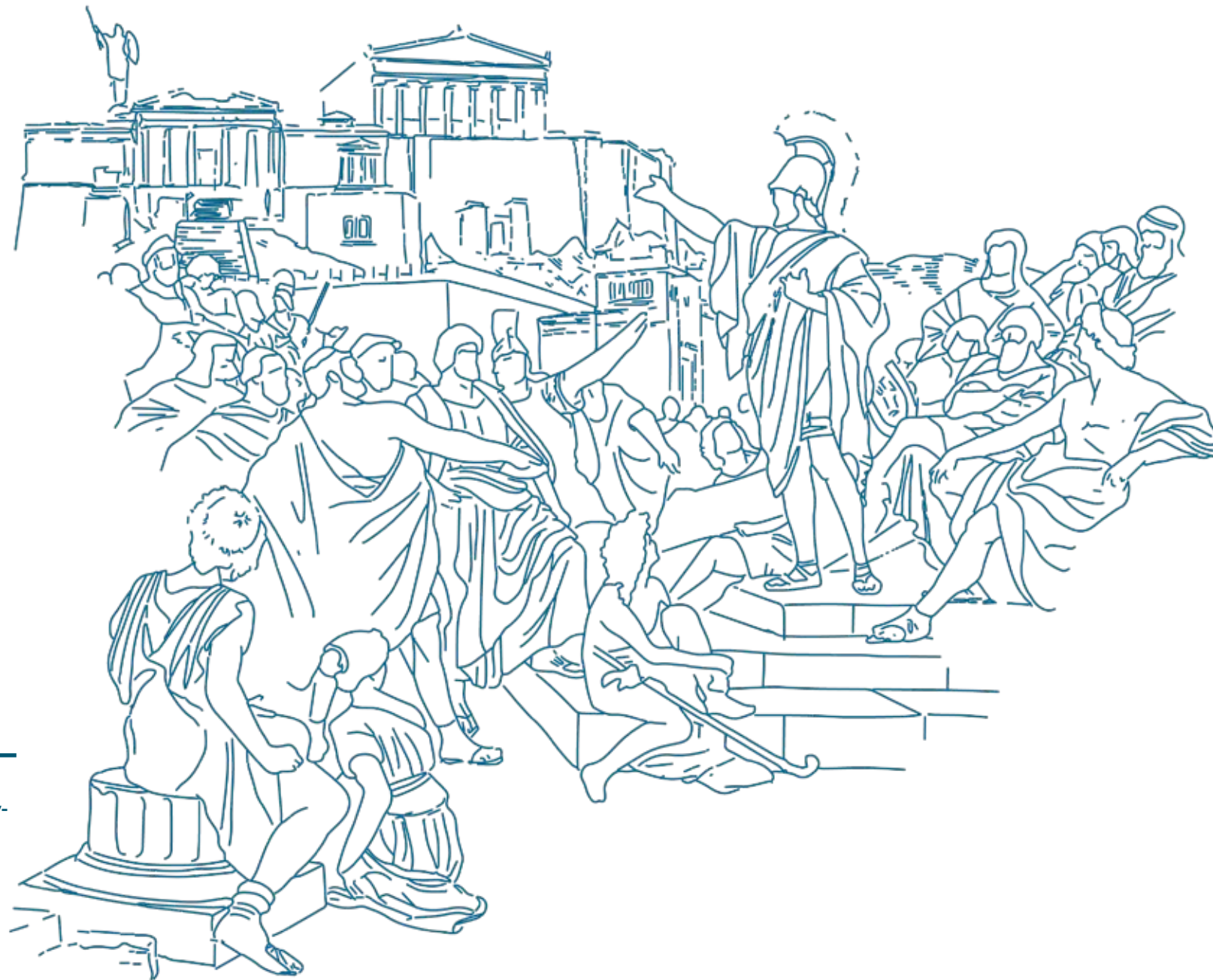
For thousands of years, the idea of public participation in government has been a source of fascination as well as power struggles. In the last 2500 years, the basic ideas about what constitutes 'democracy' have developed considerably.

In ancient times, democracy meant simply an assembly where citizens could discuss and decide public issues. Today, the term democracy stands for a much more comprehensive set of principles and procedural rules, including human rights and the rule of law, as well as the right to vote for representatives in elections (indirect democracy) or to co-decide on issues (direct democracy).

THE LIMITS OF THE ATHENIAN DEMOCRACY

Ancient Athens is frequently credited with being the birthplace of democracy (popular rule). It was there in the year 594 BC that the principles of equal rights and greater access to power for the people were introduced. For the first time, participation in public affairs and the right to hold office were extended to a much broader section of the populace.

Nonetheless, this first attempt at democracy still excluded the majority of people, such as women and slaves. In fact, at that time, the whole governmental structure was based on a system of slavery which only allowed the elite to participate in assemblies.



Pre-modern democracies were assembly democracies at the city-state level as in ancient Greece. However, 'the people' was limited to a few rich and free men.

Image: "Pericles' Funeral Oration", Philipp Foltz

FROM ASSEMBLY TO PARLIAMENT

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

A second attempt to introduce democracy was made in Ancient Rome in the 4th century BC, when a system containing a monarchical element (the two consuls) and an aristocratic body (the senate) were combined with popular assemblies. Later, however, these democratic features faded away, as autocratic leaders like Caesar and Augustus started to take over all the powers of state for themselves.

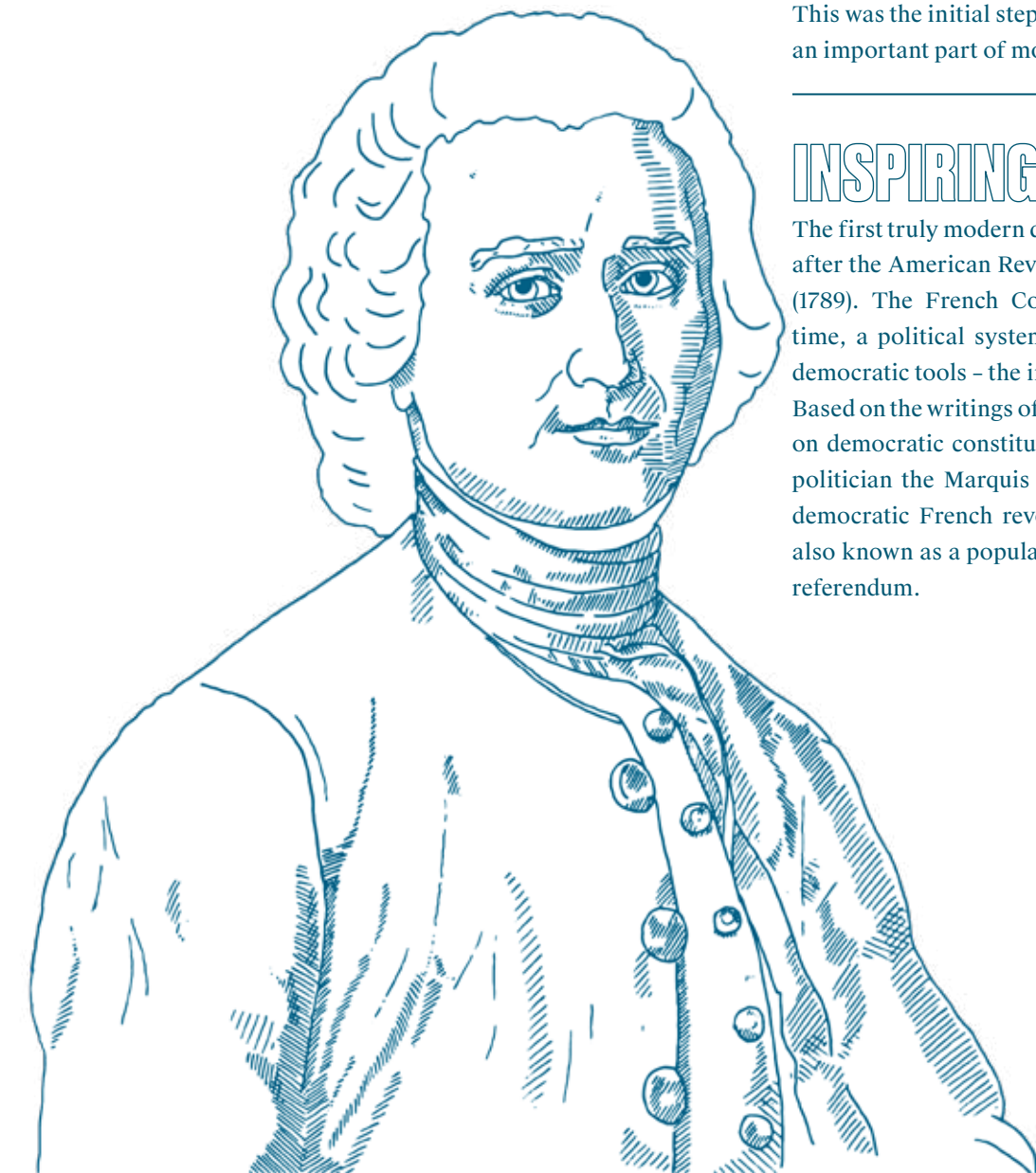
MEDIEVAL INNOVATIONS

More than a thousand years later (between the 12th and 14th century) a crucial element in many of today's democracies was introduced: the elected parliament. At first, the power of these parliaments was very limited. Nonetheless, they provided inspiration for thinkers and philosophers, and new concepts like checks and balances between different state bodies were developed. Another innovation during this period was the introduction of the Bill of Rights in England in 1689. This was the initial step towards the establishment of human rights as an important part of modern democracy.

INSPIRING REVOLUTIONS

The first truly modern democratic states did not come into being until after the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the French Revolution (1789). The French Constitution of 1793 introduced, for the first time, a political system combining elected government with direct democratic tools – the initiative and the referendum.

Based on the writings of the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau on democratic constitution-making (in Corsica and Poland), French politician the Marquis of Condorcet led the work towards the first democratic French revolution – introducing the citizens' initiative, also known as a popular initiative, and the mandatory constitutional referendum.



Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau contributed to the first democratic revolution in France. As a consequence, the concept of elected parliament and sovereign people spread across Europe and the world.

Image: "Portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau", Maurice Quentin de La Tour

SWITZERLAND: INVENTED BY REFERENDUM

FRENCH IDEAS, SWISS CONTEXT

While the French revolution ended in a return to a pre-democratic regime (an absolute monarchy), its ideas were exported. The French leader Napoleon Bonaparte tried to unify the Swiss cantons (cantons are the sovereign entities, similar to states that together form the Swiss Federal State) into a central state around the year 1800 and introduced the idea of the nationwide referendum.

This idea was not totally new to the Swiss Confederation. A kind of popular vote had already been experienced centuries before across the territory of the Swiss Confederation, which at that time was a loose network of independent states. Envoys walked from village to village with backpacks full of documents to convey negotiating positions on common issues. The envoys would return with agreements and present them to the citizens of their village for acceptance or refusal. This 'bringing back' of the documents is the origin of the term 'referendum' (Latin:'re' = 'back', 'ferre' = 'bring').

REFERENDUM AFTER WAR

While Napoleon's attempt to unify the Swiss cantons at the beginning of the 19th century failed, democratic constitutions were introduced in many of the cantons, featuring the popular referendum (veto right by the citizens). Additionally, almost all cantons started to establish constitutions based on a popular (at that time male-only) vote. Finally, in 1848, after a brief civil war between the (victorious) Protestant cantons and the Catholic ones, a popular referendum on a new federal constitution was held – with most people and cantons voting in favour. Modern Switzerland was hereby formally invented – by referendum.



Helvetia became the symbol of the fall of the Helvetic Republic, an attempt by France to impose central authority over Switzerland. Nevertheless Napoleon Bonaparte influenced Swiss democracy by organising the first nationwide referendum. You still find Helvetia on the back of Swiss franc coins.

Image: "Seated Helvetia" on an 1850 one Franc coin

TOWARDS MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY

MODERNISATION YES, CENTRALISATION NO

During the first half of the 19th century the cantons could retain their autonomy and pursue democracy on their own. There were democratic revolutions in 12 cantons, with ruling elites being replaced by representative democratic institutions. All cantons, with the sole exception of the canton of Fribourg, approved their new constitutions in a popular vote.

Modern direct democracy was introduced on Swiss territory in the form of a popular veto right. The first canton to introduce the popular veto right was St. Gallen in eastern Switzerland, where a conflict between (urban) liberals and (rural) democrats almost led to a civil war when farmers from across the state 'invaded' the capital city of the canton. The farmers were diverted by a compromise – to allow a few hundred citizens to put a decision by the cantonal parliament to a popular vote.

“The introduction of this popular right made all violent threats obsolete”, historian Bruno Wickli recently concluded in reference to the St. Gallen case. Subsequently, several cantons introduced similar tools of modern direct democracy into their constitutions.

Introducing the popular veto right in all Swiss cantons and at the federal level in the late 19th century turned out to be a great way of preventing conflict in a country as culturally diverse as Switzerland.

Map: "Switzerland, 2017", Presence Switzerland



1848: A SUCCESSFUL DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION IN EUROPE

A CIVIL WAR

In 1847, a conflict between the progressive Protestant cantons and the conservative Catholic cantons led to a relatively bloodless civil war. Fewer than 150 soldiers lost their lives and the war was eventually won by the progressive cantons. To resolve this conflict, the first Federal Constitution was drafted and put to a popular vote in most Swiss cantons one year later.

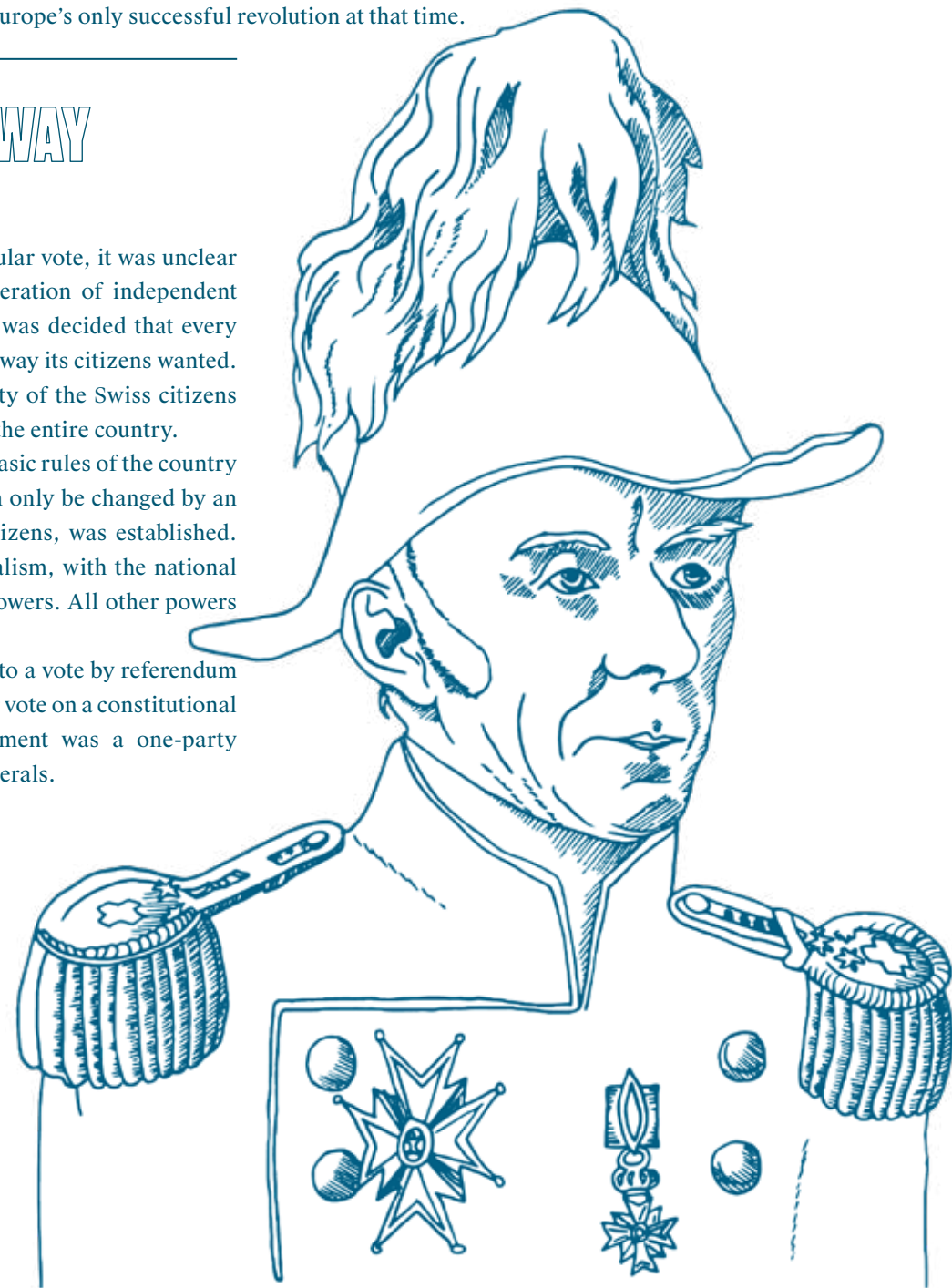
The 1848 Federal Constitution institutionalised a new system of federal government based on the model of the progressive Protestant cantons. Citizens obtained the right to propose full constitutional revisions, and also the right to vote on constitutional amendments proposed by Parliament. The introduction of a modern democracy was the consequence of Europe's only successful revolution at that time.

EVERY CANTON THE WAY ITS CITIZENS LIKE

As this was the first genuine nationwide popular vote, it was unclear how a national popular vote in a loose federation of independent cantons should be conducted. Eventually, it was decided that every canton had the right to conduct its vote in the way its citizens wanted. With a majority of the cantons and a majority of the Swiss citizens saying 'yes', the constitution was ratified for the entire country.

With this constitution, the principle that the basic rules of the country and its parts (cantons and municipalities) can only be changed by an affirmative vote by its people, the Swiss citizens, was established. The new Swiss system also enshrined federalism, with the national government being given only very specific powers. All other powers were reserved for the cantons.

The citizens still had no right to put an issue to a vote by referendum by gathering signatures or to trigger a popular vote on a constitutional amendment by initiative. The new government was a one-party government, completely dominated by the liberals.



As army general, Henri Dufour led the progressive Protestant cantons in the civil war against the conservative Catholic cantons in 1847. His victory paved the way for the popular vote on the first federal constitution a year later.

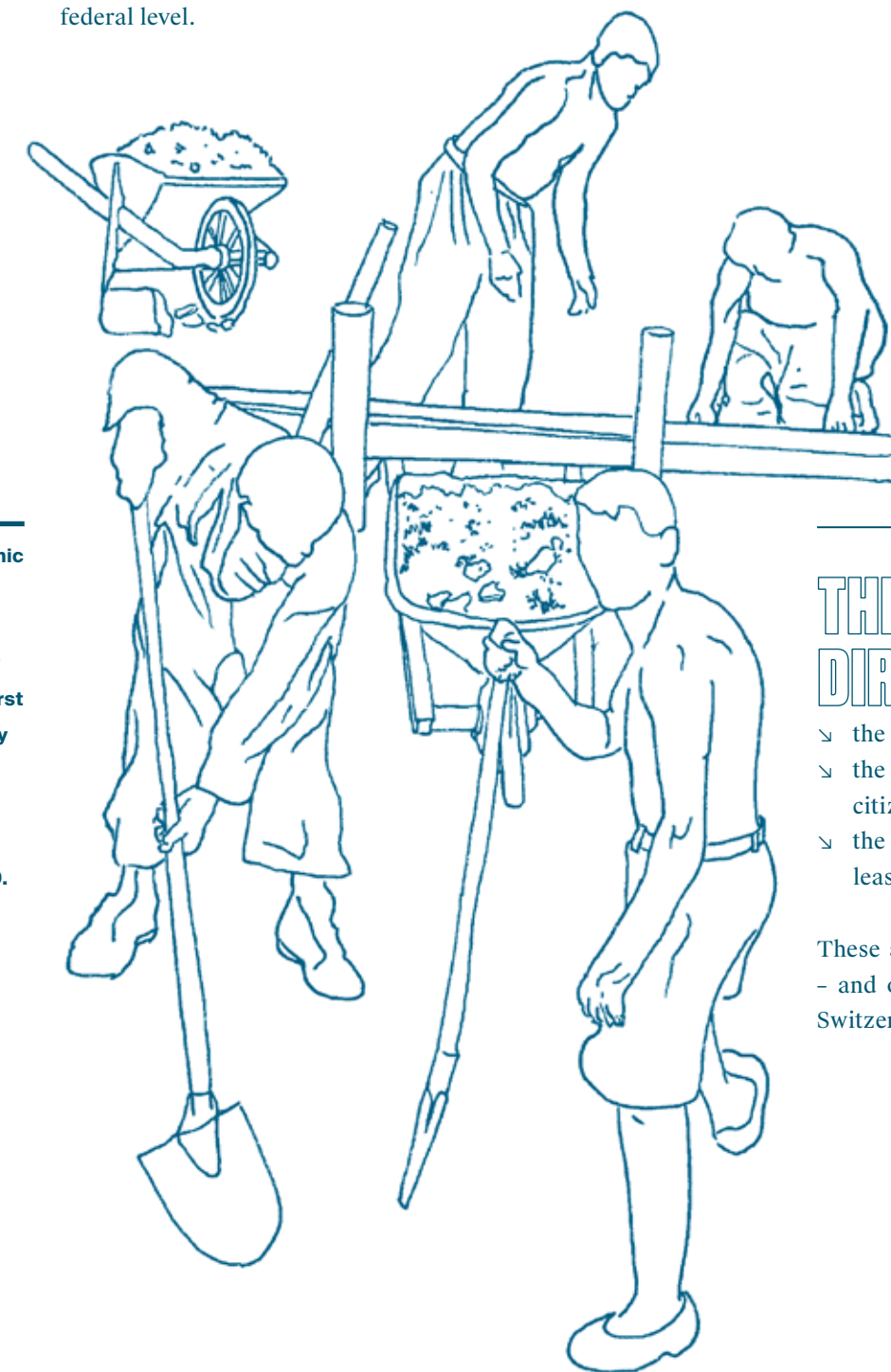
Image: "Portrait of General Guillaume-Henri Dufour", H. Guggenheim

A NEW MODEL OF LAWMAKING

In the newly founded democratic state of Switzerland, one political party – the urban Protestant liberals – held all the seats in the federal government. This created a great deal of tension with the more conservative and rural parts of the country. However, proposals and attempts to share power were rejected by the new elite.

From 1860 on, railway construction generated considerable economic development, which mainly increased the political and economic power of the liberal elite. In the canton of Zurich, already then the powerhouse of finance and business, many citizens demanded more political power. In 1869 the so-called democratic movement succeeded in adopting a new cantonal constitution, which gave the citizens the right not only to elect representatives and vote on constitutional amendments, but also to propose and vote on new amendments to the constitution and laws.

After Zurich, all 26 cantons introduced similar ways of letting the people make major decisions. In 1874 and 1891, the Swiss electorate decided to introduce the optional referendum (for laws adopted by Parliament) and the citizens' initiative (for amendments to the constitution) at the federal level.



Railway construction and economic development in the middle of the 19th century were followed by popular demands for more power and political participation. As a first step, the canton of Zurich, already then known for business and finance, introduced the citizens' initiative as an instrument of modern direct democracy in 1869.

Image: "Construction work on an access road", Swiss Social Archives

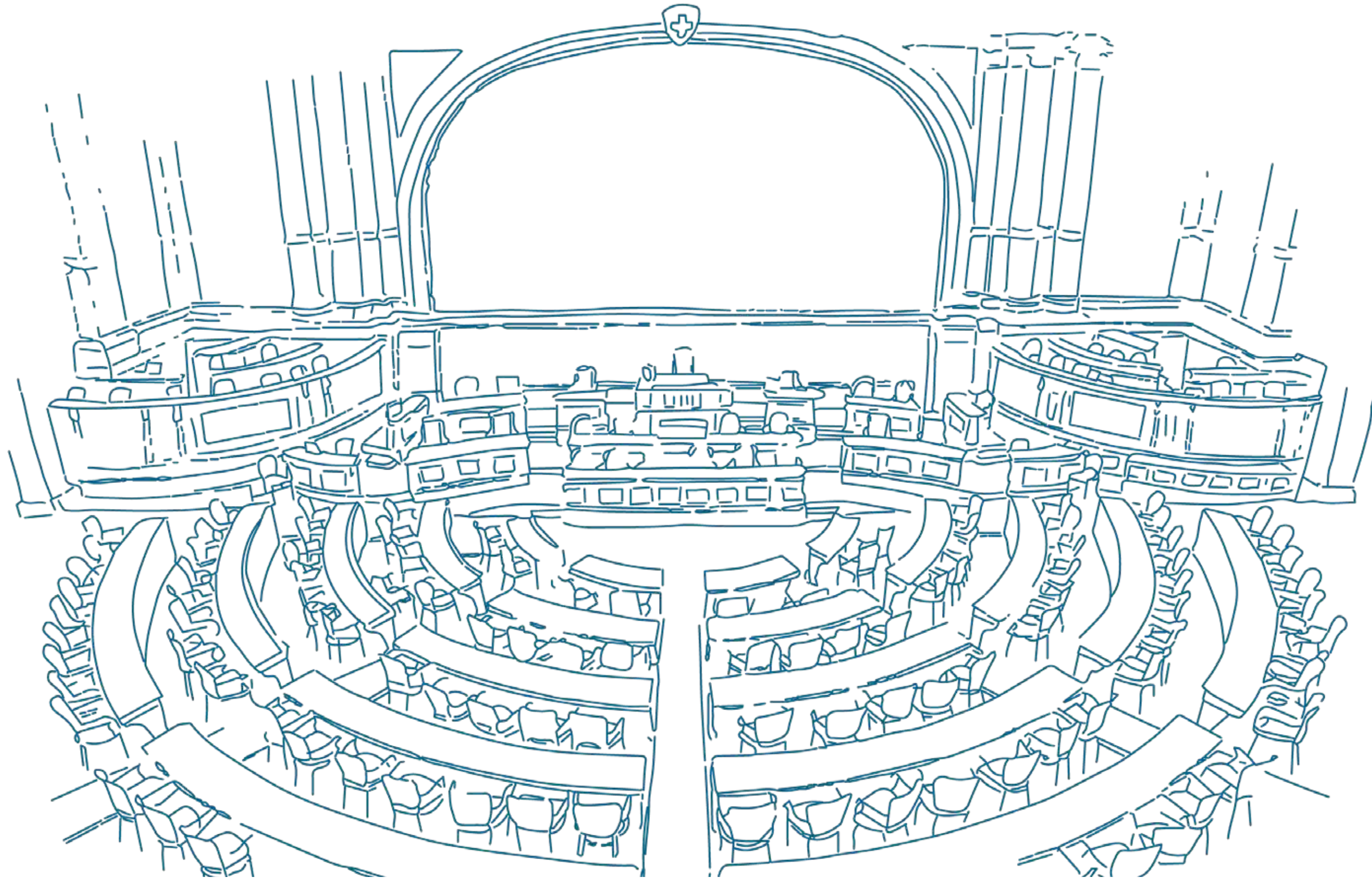
THE 3 ELEMENTS OF MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY

- the mandatory referendum (for all constitutional changes)
- the optional referendum (when requested by at least 50,000 citizens within 100 days after the publication of a new law)
- the citizens' initiative (for constitutional amendments, with at least 100,000 signatures to be collected within 18 months)

These are still today the most important features of Swiss politics – and one can find variants of them on all political levels within Switzerland, and in more than 100 other countries across the globe.

INITIATIVES AND REFERENDUMS IN PRACTICE

The two key instruments of modern direct democracy in Switzerland are the citizens' initiative and the popular (optional) referendum. Since their establishment in 1874 (referendum) and 1891 (initiative), these instruments have been used frequently to promote ideas and control the elected Parliament.



An important consequence of the direct democratic citizens' right is that Parliament tries to include all possible stakeholders from an early phase in the law-making process.

Image: "The chamber of the National Council", Swiss Parliament

AGENDA SETTING

The most important feature of the citizens' initiative process is the ability to set the political agenda of the country. In Switzerland, a nationwide citizens' initiative needs to address a constitutional amendment (or propose a total revision of the constitution). Out of 446 (all numbers as of 1 February 2017) registered citizens' initiatives in Swiss history, 324 have managed to gather the required minimum of 100,000 signatures (until 1977 you only needed 50,000) and 209 have been the subject of a federal popular vote. Only 22 have been approved by both the majority of the participating citizens and the majority of the 26 cantons. On the other side, in 114 cases the initiators did not manage to gather enough support, while in 96 cases the initiative committee chose to withdraw their proposal before the end of the process. This can happen when the government and Parliament submit a counter-proposal.

DECISION-MAKING

The right to an optional referendum offers Swiss citizens the chance to control the legislative process at the national level. Every federal law can be put to a popular vote if at least 50,000 signatures are gathered within 100 days after the official publication of the law. It is a direct democratic right with mainly indirect effects; Parliament tries to avoid such referendums by including potentially critical positions during the law-making process. So only a small percentage of all adopted laws are put to a popular vote by the citizens. Since 1874 this has happened in 183 cases. In an additional 34 cases, the referendum committees were not successful in gathering the required support. The initiative and referendum rights are important tools when it comes to exercising popular sovereignty in Switzerland beyond election day. These rights ensure a continuous conversation between the citizens and their elected representatives on a daily basis – a conversation that helps make representative democracy more representative.

CITIZENS' INITIATIVES: YEARS OF WORK FOR A NEW IDEA

The citizens' initiative is an important instrument of modern direct democracy. It enables citizens to make their voices heard by going through a process of dialogue with the political institutions. The instrument gives a minority the right to place an issue on the agenda for the whole electorate – and to get an answer. In Switzerland, the citizens' initiative at the national level typically provides for the following process.

STARTER KIT

Imagine that you want to transform your idea of change or innovation into a proposal for constitutional amendment. In such a case, you need to establish an initiative committee in order to be allowed to register the initiative at the Federal Chancellery. You need yourself and at least six more colleagues in the committee. Then you can contact the Federal Chancellery to receive guidelines for drafting your constitutional amendment. You have to register the proposed article in three national languages and you can start to gather signatures after the formal publication of the text in the Federal Gazette.



Take your time! For a nation-wide citizens' initiative it can take up to 70 months until the formal vote.

Images: "Collecting signatures" and "Ballot box", Presence Switzerland
Graph: "Citizen's initiative", data: Federal Chancellery; design: Presence Switzerland



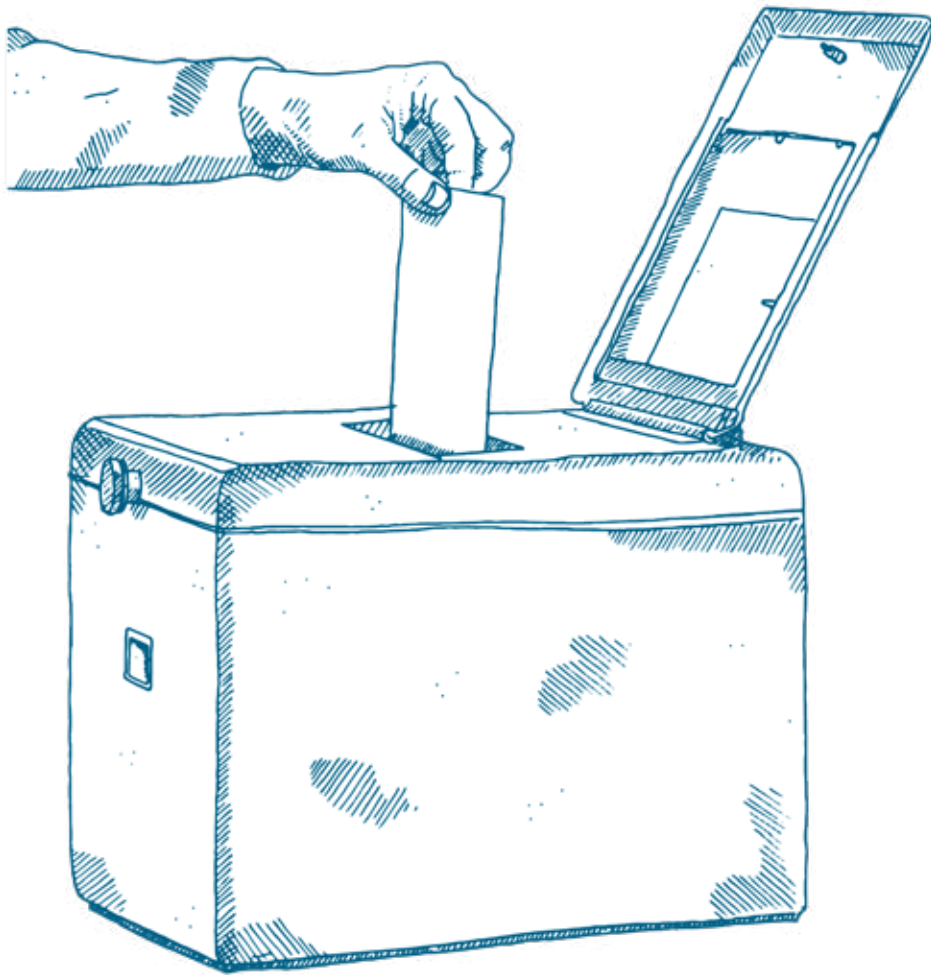
A LONG PROCESS

Now you have 18 months to find at least another 100,000 people who support your idea. This requires a huge amount of PR work and some money. As part of the initiative committee you will be responsible for sending all signature forms to the municipal administrations that are responsible for verifying them in the electoral register. Finally, you will need to personally submit the boxes containing the signature lists to the Federal Chancellery. From that point on, your initiative is an official federal issue!

Now it is the government's turn: it has to respond within one and a half years. In most cases the Federal Council does not exactly agree with an initiative. Therefore it sometimes proposes an alternative counter-proposal to the initiative. The initiative committee is allowed to withdraw an initiative until the government has set a date for the popular vote. In Switzerland, the published position of the government and the two chambers of Parliament on an issue are just recommendations. In most cases the three stakeholders agree on one common recommendation. The final say is always with the highest authority in the country – the Swiss electorate. For this reason a citizens' initiative is almost always a multiyear process, requiring considerable patience, money and time from the initiators.

DECISION DAY

The government will set a date for the final popular vote on your initiative. Until then you will have to campaign very hard to have a chance of winning. Six to three weeks ahead of the vote (depending on where you live) all Swiss citizens (including those living abroad) will receive ballot papers sent to their homes. Most of them will send them back by post. In several cantons there is a new option of voting online. Only a few voters will go to the polling station on the weekend of the vote. To win the vote you need both the majority of the overall popular vote and majority votes in the cantons.



POPULAR REFERENDUMS: 100 DAYS TO STOP A NEW LAW

With the popular referendum, citizens get to genuinely test the law-making process. In contrast to the pro-active citizens' initiative, the referendum is a re-active tool allowing citizens and organisations to enter into a dialogue with political parties and elected lawmakers during the preparatory stages of law-making.

IMPORTANT PREPARATIONS

Important preparatory work cannot wait until a new law is officially published in the Federal Gazette. At that point, the 100-day countdown for gathering and verifying the required signatures starts. You need to get in touch with the Federal Chancellery ahead of the adoption and publication of the law. They will offer you advice and precise information about what your signature form needs to contain to make sure the signatures are valid. Your form must make clear reference to the law you want to put to a popular vote across the country. And you need to ensure that the signature forms are available in at least three languages (German, French and Italian) before the end of the process.

NO TIME TO LOSE

As the time frame for gathering the number of signatures required is short (at least in comparison to the 18 months available for citizens' initiatives), you need to have a clear plan as to where and how you want to reach out to the public. The other option is for eight cantons to demand a referendum. So far, this has only happened once since 1848. Since the introduction of this right only one such referendum has taken place – in 2004 on a national tax law.

VOTING DAY

If you have been successful in gathering the required 50,000 signatures within 100 days, the contested law will not come into force but will be put to a nationwide popular vote – normally at the next scheduled voting day. Popular referendum votes on laws only require a simple popular majority in favour or against. A double majority with the cantons is not required.

THE UNFINISHED SWISS DEMOCRACY

Swiss people can change the Federal Constitution whenever they can agree on such a change. Few constitutional changes and popular votes are just about the procedures of modern direct democracy themselves. But this does not mean that they are accepted uncritically. Although many important extensions – such as giving voting rights to new groups – have been accepted, proposals for new forms of direct democracy are sometimes rejected.

THE QUESTION OF BALANCE

Today, Switzerland is a modern representative democracy with strong tools for direct democracy. This means that most decisions are made by elected representatives. At the same time the Swiss constitution ensures individual human rights and the collective rights of minorities. The principle guaranteeing this is the rule of law. However, the ways in which these classic representative principles need to be balanced by direct democratic instruments have been debated since the establishment of the modern Swiss state in 1848.

COUNTER-PROPOSALS AND ‘DOUBLE YES’

A telling example of the fine-tuned character of modern Swiss democracy is the story behind the introduction of the so-called ‘counter-proposal double yes’. In order to allow for a dialogue between citizens and elected institutions, Parliament has the right to draft a counter-proposal to a citizens' initiative. If the initiative sponsor is happy with the counter-proposal, a compromise is reached and the initiative can be withdrawn. If Parliament and the initiative sponsor cannot agree, the voters are asked to vote either yes or no on both the initiative and the counter-proposal. Voters are also asked a third question – whether they prefer the initiative or the counter-proposal in the event that both are approved by the voters. This method was introduced in 1987.

OPTIONS AND LIMITS

Ever since the creation of fundamental popular rights during the first 50 years of Swiss statehood (mandatory constitutional referendum 1848, optional popular referendum 1874, citizens' initiative 1891) these instruments have been continuously revised, fine-tuned, extended and sometimes even restricted. Famous extensions include the introduction of popular referendums on international treaties in 1921 and the overdue establishment of female suffrage in 1971. In 1977 the citizens approved the federal decision by Parliament to double the number of required signatures for initiatives and referendums. However, this just balanced out the fact that through the introduction of female suffrage the electorate had been doubled.

MORE IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER

There are also many examples of when the electorate has deemed that a proposal to extend citizens' rights is not very useful. Citizens' initiatives proposing the direct election of the seven members of the Swiss Federal Council have been launched and put to a vote three times. Each time a clear majority has voted no, leaving the prerogative to elect the government with Parliament. Proposals to extend the referendum right to all military expenditures have also been defeated at the ballot box. Democracy in Switzerland is and will in no doubt remain an unfinished journey.

Did you know that in Switzerland women had to wait until 1971 before they could participate in elections and referendums at federal level? First they needed a majority of the male voters to support this right – in a nationwide vote.

Image: "Women's protest march, probably taken on an International Workers Day demonstration", Swiss Social Archives



POPULAR VOTES IN SWITZERLAND: WHAT ABOUT AND HOW OFTEN?

HOW OFTEN DO THE SWISS VOTE?

On average a Swiss voter is called to the ballot box four times a year. A calendar sets out all voting dates for the next twenty years. The average number of national issues coming up at the ballot box is rising and lies currently around ten per year. Every fourth year in October, however, elections for Parliament take place. On this occasion no other issues are voted on. But in addition to the national issues, a Swiss citizen is also eligible to vote at the local and the regional level. Independent of federal issues, in communes and cantons many issues are voted on directly, and citizens have – depending on where they live – comprehensive initiative and referendum rights. Typically, the more populated the city or canton you live in, the more occasions you will have to make your voice heard at the ballot box.

WHAT ARE THE SWISS VOTING ON?

Since the year 2000 more than 150 different issues have been subject to a nationwide popular vote. 81 of them were citizens’ initiatives to amend the federal constitution, 48 were popular referendums, and the rest were mandatory popular votes on constitutional changes proposed by Parliament. The topics most often voted on are the government system, transportation, social services, environmental issues and healthcare. The Federal Council and Parliament have been on the winning side in more than two thirds of all votes. In some instances, one of the four government parties may even have to accept that its initiative has been rejected by the people.

On average, a Swiss voter is called to the ballot box 4 times a year. The most popular issues deal with European integration, transportation, the environment, foreigners and social services.

Image: "Today we vote",
Presence Switzerland



WINNING BY LOSING

Most citizens’ initiatives do not achieve the double majority requirement (citizens and cantons), while about half of the popular referendums are accepted by the popular vote. However, most initiators are quite content with the agenda-setting opportunity as such, as the initiative right gives them the chance to discuss their own proposals and ideas with the whole nation for a period of several years. A recent example is the citizens’ initiative to introduce an unconditional basic income for all people domiciled in Switzerland, which was voted down by a three-quarters majority in May 2016. The losing side was still happy because their proposal received a great deal of attention and was widely discussed – not only in Switzerland but across the whole world.

MANY WAYS TO PARTICIPATE

Being invited to have a formal say as often as the Swiss requires a solid participatory toolbox. While a few (fewer and fewer in fact) opt for the traditional walk to the polling station on Sunday morning, 9 out of 10 Swiss people return the envelope sent to them by the authorities for postal voting. Recently, a third option has been added for some: e-voting. It is mainly Swiss citizens living outside the country (there are more than 700,000 of them but only 150,000 are registered) who have been given the opportunity to vote electronically. When it comes to signing an initiative or a referendum, all eligible Swiss citizens across the globe can print the initiative or referendum sheet and submit their signed form by post. The fact that Swiss people are able to vote around one month before Election Day is also important.

THE RISE IN CITIZENS' INITIATIVES

MORE AND MORE EVERY DECADE

After the introduction of the federal citizens' initiative in 1891, only five citizens' initiatives were submitted in the first decade afterwards. At that time, there was no time frame for gathering the required number of signatures. Between 1911 and 1920, only two citizens' initiatives made it to the popular vote. Since then however, this form of participation has become more and more popular, especially after 1989 when there was a real boom in citizens' initiatives. Every decade since then, a new record has been set. Between 2011 and 2017, 35 initiatives have already been voted on. Not many citizens' initiatives are fully accepted by both the people and the cantons: out of 209 citizens' initiatives which have been brought to a vote, only 22 – about 10.5 % – have been accepted by both the people and the cantons. There are many reasons for the growing popularity of the citizens' initiative tool. One is that political parties, which are represented both in Parliament and government, like to see the citizens' initiative not just as an opposition tool for under-represented groups, but also as a way of setting the political agenda – and getting public attention ahead of elections.

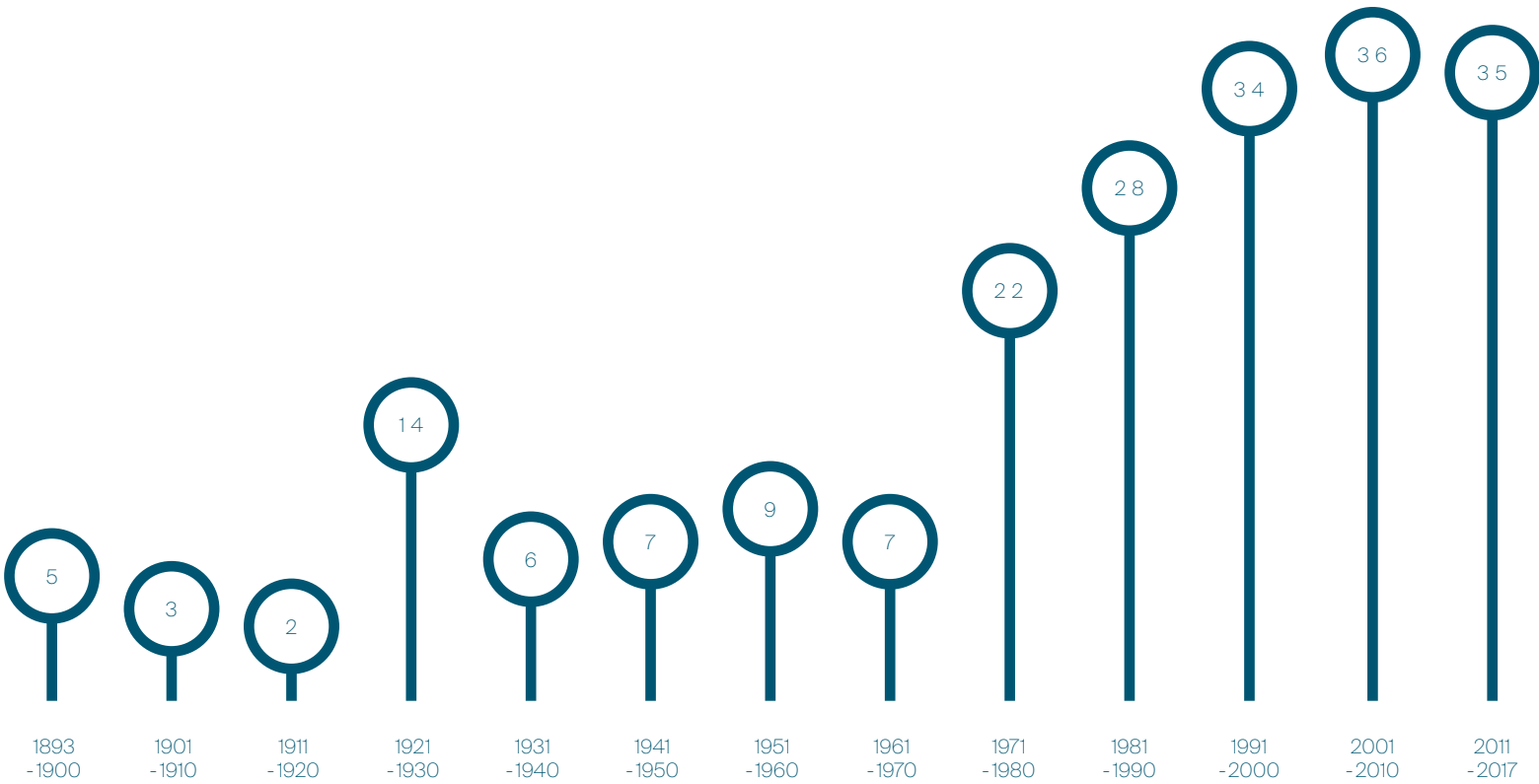
TYPES OF INITIATIVES

This rise in citizens' initiatives has also led to greater diversity when it comes to their intended purpose:

- The original and classic purpose of the citizens' initiative is the 'gas pedal' function, which means using the initiative process as a way to promote a new idea. Successful examples include the Alpine Initiative (1994), UN membership (2002) and the so-called Fat Cat Initiative (2013), which limited bonus payments in stock market companies.
- A second and also traditional use of the initiative is as a brake, for example in the case of the initiative to limit the construction of minarets (2009), the limitation of free movement for EU citizens (2014), and the continued use of nuclear energy (2016).
- Third and in fact in most cases, the initiative can also be used as a bargaining chip to get Parliament and the government to respond, possibly with a direct (or indirect) counter-proposal. Many of those initiatives set an issue on the political agenda without being able to convince a majority. Recent examples include the left-wing 1:12 initiative (2015) on salaries and the right-wing 'self-determination' proposal (to be voted on by 2019) regarding the relationship between national and international law.

The Swiss have become more active citizens. This diagram shows the number of initiatives having been brought to a popular vote from 1893 to 2016.

Graph: "Federal initiatives", data: Federal Chancellery; design: Presence Switzerland



THE “TRUTH” BEHIND SWISS TURNOUT

TURNOUT RATES ARE HARD TO COMPARE

In most international comparisons of political participation, Switzerland is far down the ranking list. As in the United States, about 50% of Swiss voters participate in federal elections, whereas in other countries, like Austria for example, the participation rate exceeds 75%. However, this is just one aspect of Swiss voter participation. As there are plenty of opportunities to have a say – with four or more votes on popular issues each year – most Swiss citizens participate selectively. According to research from the University of Geneva, 90% of all eligible voters participate at least once during a four-year period, almost 80% turn out at least once a year, and one-third cast their ballots in all local, regional and national votes. This makes Switzerland one of the frontrunners when it comes to formal political participation worldwide –since in many countries elections take place only every second, fourth or even fifth year. In the final analysis, Switzerland has very few total abstainers (less than 10%); most are selective voters and only a minority can be called ‘model’ voters.

INTERESTING VOTES ON EUROPE AND THE RULE OF LAW

While model voters (those who always participate) are very interested in political affairs – and mostly vote according to their personal preferences and party affiliations–selective voters are a very heterogeneous group, with a limited interest in politics and no strong party allegiance. This group is sensitive to intense campaigns and can be mobilised if very important issues are at stake. In this case, turnouts can reach up to 80%, which is very seldom (as for the referendum on Switzerland’s entry into the Economic European Area in 1992).

CONTENTED LOSERS

According to the European Social Survey, Swiss citizens are generally highly satisfied with the way democracy works in their country – even including the losers of popular votes. On a ten-point scale of democratic satisfaction, more than 66% give 7 or more points and only 7% choose a score between 0 and 3 points. In other highly developed European democracies such as Germany, France and the United Kingdom, respondents have been much less happy with their democracy: depending on the country, between 25% and 33% gave a score between 0 and 3 points and 24% to 37% a score between 7 and 10.

INTEGRATION BY DIRECT DEMOCRACY

LINGUISTIC GROUPS

Switzerland is a genuinely multicultural society. Switzerland has four national languages and many immigrant communities with other languages: 63.3% of inhabitants call (Swiss) German their native language, while 22.7% identify French, 8.1% Italian and 0.5% Romansch as their mother tongue. In most parts of the world there is consensus about the necessity of respecting the needs and wishes of minority groups in the political system. Without such mutual respect, violent internal struggles are much more likely to occur. The question therefore is: how does the Swiss political system integrate the different minority groups into the political dialogue?

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HEARD

Two aspects are critical to the capacity of the Swiss political system to integrate the country’s different peoples and cultures. First, the combined system of federalism and direct democracy ensures that minorities are heard at the institutional and political level. The configuration of political minority and majority groupings changes from issue to issue. Second, the government ensures that proper support infrastructure is in place to help people from all language groups to use the initiative and referendum process effectively. The Federal Chancellery is responsible for easy access to official documents in all national languages. Modern direct democracy is a constitutive element of political integration in the country. Another large minority group in Switzerland are non-Swiss citizens. There are more than 2 million foreigners living in Switzerland (25% of the total population). Except for rejected asylum seekers, non-citizens have the same social and economic rights and duties as Swiss citizens. But what about the political inclusion of this minority group? This question has been discussed in Switzerland for more than a hundred years.

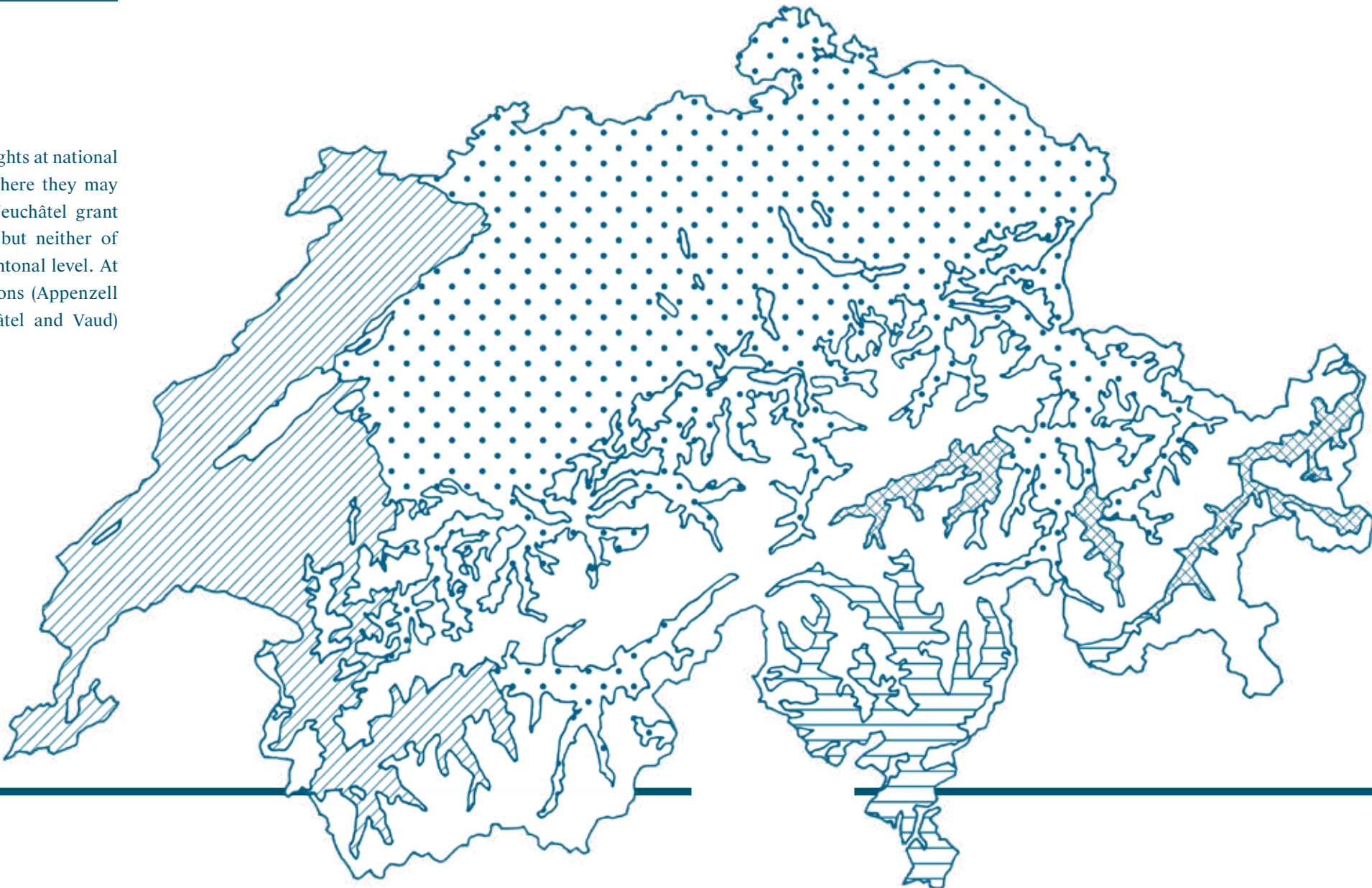
LIMITED RIGHTS FOR THE NON-SWISS

In Switzerland, non-Swiss citizens have no political rights at national level. But there are some cantons and communes where they may exercise political rights: the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel grant foreigners the right to vote in cantonal elections, but neither of them allows foreigners to stand for election at the cantonal level. At the communal level, 600 communes across six cantons (Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Fribourg, Graubünden, Jura, Neuchâtel and Vaud) grant foreigners the right to stand for election.

A mix of direct democratic rights and federal decentralised government makes Switzerland a country with well-protected minorities. However, one quarter of the population does not have a Swiss passport and their rights depend on local and regional legislation.

Map: "Switzerland's languages", data, Federal Statistical Office; design, Presence Switzerland

- German
- French
- Italian
- Romansch



HOW DID CITIZEN PARTICIPATION CONTRIBUTE TO SWISS WEALTH?

TOWARDS RUIN...

“Direct democracy in general, and the referendum in particular, will ruin the Swiss economy,” declared economist Walter Wittmann at the end of the last century. Wittmann argued that direct democracy interrupted progress and was responsible for Switzerland not being part of the European Union (EU).

...OR GREATER WEALTH?

Empirical studies pointed in quite a different direction. St. Gallen economists Gebhard Kirchgässner and Lars Feld published a study in which they analysed the economic effects of legislation on direct democratic procedures in different Swiss cantons. They found that in cantons with stronger direct democratic rights there was higher economic performance, less tax avoidance, less cantonal and communal debt, lower public expenditure and cheaper public services.

GOOD FOR BUSINESS

According to the most recent research by Alois Stutzer, professor of economics at the University of Basel, companies do not suffer a negative impact from Swiss-style direct democracy, but rather the opposite. The Global Competitiveness Report assesses the quality of regulations, services, infrastructure and the education of the potential workforce, as well as access to capital. According to Stutzer, thanks to direct democratic decisions on infrastructure and services, a series of large companies, including Google, have established their research departments in Switzerland.

IMPACT ON INFRASTRUCTURE AND FINANCES

The efficient use of resources and public funds in Switzerland is linked to the fact that voters have a final say on, for instance, new schools or public swimming pools – and that has an impact on finances. If a taxpayer is confident that they can control state spending, they might agree to more funds being allocated in order to get better services in return. In Switzerland, public debt levels are relatively low as the citizens, in a popular vote, decided to make large public debt unconstitutional. With a per capita wealth of more than half a million Swiss francs (or USD/EUR), Switzerland today is one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

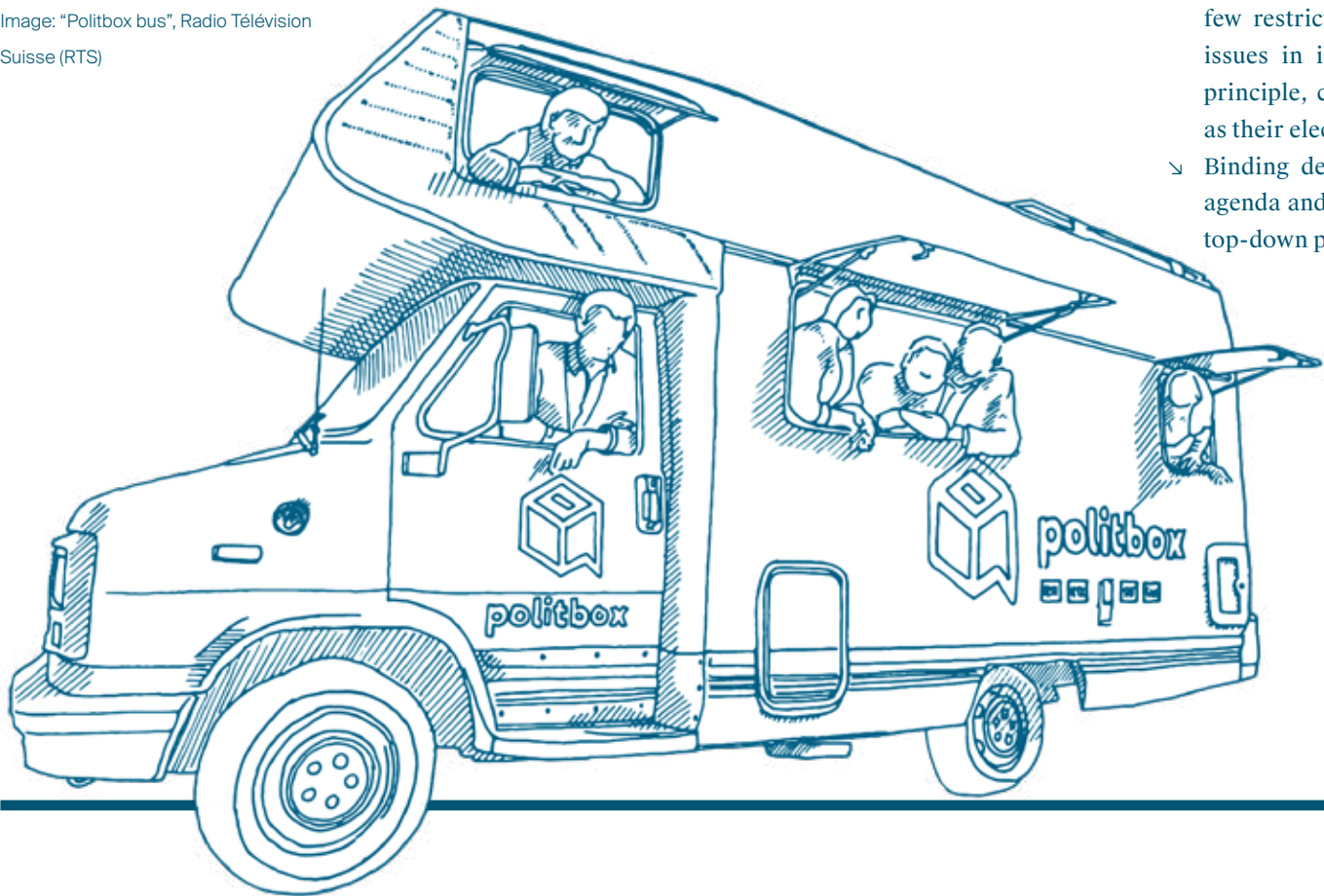
THE DESIGN OF MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY: A KEY FACTOR FOR SUCCESS

In many countries around the world direct democratic tools of participation come with many hurdles and restrictions. These limitations include (too) short time frames for gathering signatures and the need for extensive documentation to validate signatures. Obstacles to voting procedures on issues include high turnout quorums, which limit the possibility that a popular vote will be considered valid, and non-binding decisions – opening up the process to all kinds of manipulative manoeuvres that ultimately undermine the legitimacy of (direct) democracy.

Interestingly, Switzerland does not have many of these problems that are linked to the design of the initiative and referendum process. All popular votes here are binding, the time frames offer plenty of opportunities even for less well-off citizens' groups to gain the support they need, and there are several different ways citizens can cast their vote: at the polling station, by post, and even online in some cantons.

Switzerland's direct democracy has clear and citizen-friendly regulations: people can make their voices heard and have their votes counted on a regular basis. And there is still a need for educational efforts like the Politbox Caravan, a project for the 2015 national council elections, touring the country and engaging primarily with young people.

Image: "Politbox bus", Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS)



6 SWISS LESSONS FOR DESIGNING DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Several lessons may be drawn from Switzerland's long-standing experience with direct democracy:

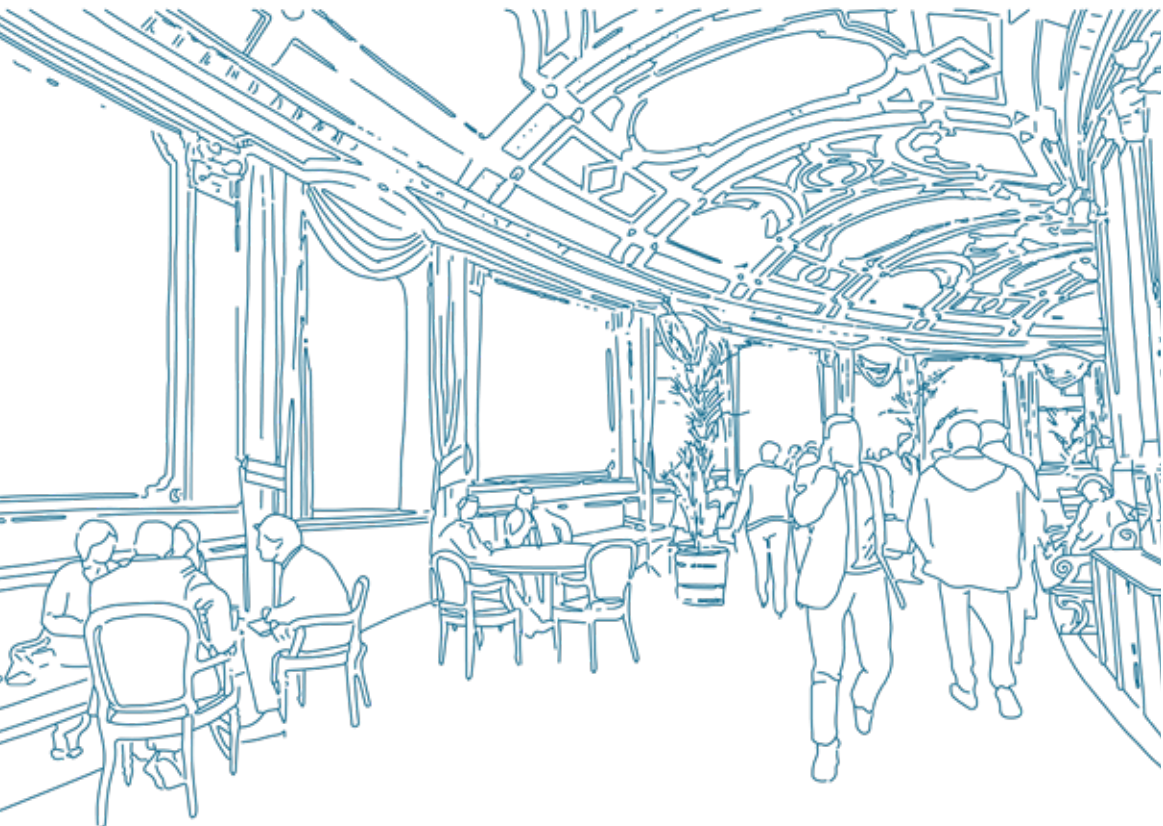
- Keep it low. High signature requirements – such as more than 5% of the electorate – may hamper opportunities for smaller groups and thus limit the impact of direct democracy. In Switzerland the requirement is approximately 1% for a referendum and 2% for an initiative.
- Keep it long. Reasonable time limits ensure a more intense debate and a better chance to collect enough signatures; overly short time allowances limit the debate and the opportunities for weaker groups. One has 18 months to gather the necessary signatures for a constitutional initiative – and 100 days for a referendum.
- Keep it free. The right to collect freely without the need for an official supervisor as is practised in Austria for example. This helps promote discussion between the initiators and the people.
- No voter turnout quorums. Switzerland has no thresholds that require a certain level of turnout for a vote to be considered valid, as they tend to undermine the democratic process by counting ‘no’ and non-voters together, creating incentives to boycott a popular vote.
- Few restrictions on subject matter. In Switzerland there are very few restrictions on the topics people can consider (only some issues in international law are considered out of bounds). In principle, citizens should have the same decision-making rights as their elected representatives in Parliament.
- Binding decisions only. Direct democracy is about setting the agenda and making decisions, not about consulting the people in top-down processes. The latter are plebiscites not referendums.

OPTIONS AND LIMITS FOR DIRECT DEMOCRACY

With the growing importance of international law and political globalisation in recent decades, the balance and conflicts between different levels of law-making have become an important issue – with high relevance for the validity of direct democratic decision-making.

The legal validity of a citizens' initiative is guaranteed by the national parliament. It is said that real politics and decisions are often made in the parliament lobby where politicians across all political divides sit together to argue about political issues.

Image: "The Wandelhalle", Swiss Parliament



THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST EXPULSION

In 1992, a citizens' initiative demanding a more restrictive asylum policy was assessed by the Swiss Parliament. The initiative requested the immediate forced return of illegal asylum seekers to their home countries. The procedure would have been in conflict with the principle of non-refoulement and therefore not compatible with rules that are binding under international law. For this reason, Parliament declared the initiative invalid in 1996.

In 2008, another initiative was launched, requesting that foreign criminals be forcibly repatriated to their home countries. Again, Parliament had to check whether this initiative was contrary to the principle of non-refoulement. But this time, Parliament came to the conclusion that the initiative was reconcilable with the rules of binding international law.

Two years later 52.5% of the participating voters approved this initiative in a nationwide vote. Parliament now had to find a solution that could make the new constitutional article compatible with international law. It introduced a so-called ‘hardship’ clause for non-Swiss citizens who have never lived in their country of origin. Yet another citizens' initiative for a strict implementation of this new provision was voted down by the electorate in February 2016 by 58.9% of the votes.

It is the task of the elected representatives in the parliaments and governments in Switzerland to balance direct democratic decision-making with other requirements of modern democracy including respect for human rights and international agreements. The new law on administrative expulsion came into force on 1 October 2016.

VALIDITY ISSUES

In Switzerland, Parliament decides whether a national initiative that has been submitted should be declared valid and thus submitted to a popular vote. There are three criteria that may lead to the disqualification of a citizens' initiative: a violation of the principle of unity of form (a concrete proposal OR a general demand, not a combination of both); a violation of the principle of unity of subject matter (that is, the initiative covers more than one subject); or a violation of rules that are binding under international law. In the last ten years several citizens' initiatives have been publicly criticised for not conforming entirely to international law, including a vote to ban the construction of new minarets and one for the life-long custody of untreatable, extremely dangerous sex offenders. However, both initiatives were declared valid by the Swiss Parliament.

BRINGING IN THE FOREIGNERS, VOTING OUT THE IMMIGRANTS

Switzerland is an active participant in international affairs and also a competitive and well connected partner in a globalised world. Nevertheless, in 1992 the country has rejected joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in a national vote; on the other hand, it has opened its borders to EU-wide policies such as the Schengen agreement and has undertaken a series of bilateral treaties with the EU.

SWISS VOTES ON IMMIGRATION ISSUES

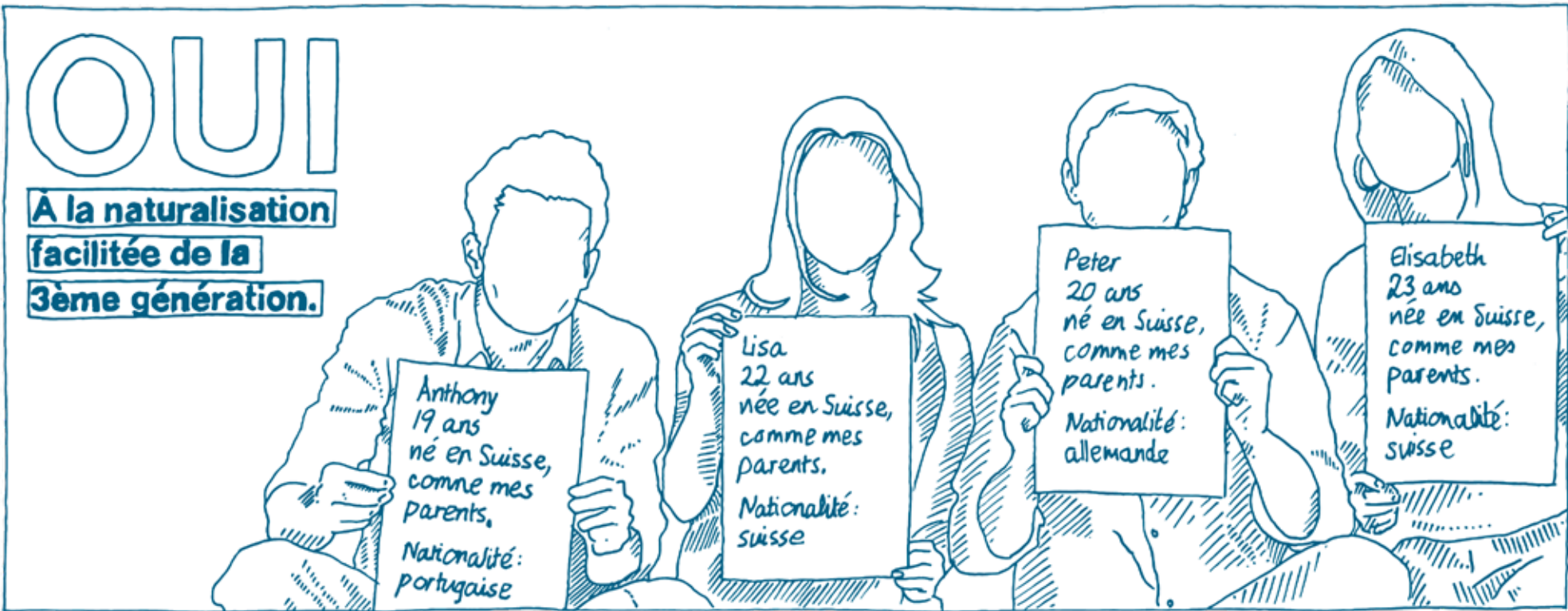
Popular votes on issues related to foreigners and immigration are as old as modern direct democracy in Switzerland. Since the 1860s more than fifty nationwide votes have been held around these issues. In general, the Swiss people have followed the balanced recommendations of the Federal Council and Parliament. This means that drastic proposals to open up or close down the country to foreigners have been mostly voted down at the ballot box.

DIFFICULT NATURALISATION

But on one point the Swiss voters have mostly disagreed with the authorities. Draft laws on easier naturalisation for foreigners have been rejected by the people. Nonetheless, Swiss citizenship laws have undergone important changes in the past 20 years. Unlike in the United States, Switzerland does not grant a child citizenship by virtue of being born on Swiss soil. A person is automatically Swiss if he or she is the child of married parents, at least one of whom is Swiss. Foreigners with no direct blood ties to Switzerland through either birth or marriage must currently live in the country for at least 12 years before they can apply for citizenship. Years spent in the country between the ages of 10 and 20 count as double. A new law reducing the number of years of residence from 12 to 10 was passed by Parliament in June 2014 and is expected to come into effect from 1 January 2018. And in February 2017, the people decided in another nationwide vote to simplify the naturalisation law for young Swiss residents (up to the age of 25).

CHALLENGING FREE MOVEMENT

Another aspect of immigration policy has been hotly debated recently: on 9 February 2014, a narrow 50.3% majority of the voters approved a popular initiative against mass immigration specifying that Switzerland should “autonomously manage the immigration of foreigners” by reintroducing “ceilings and annual quotas.” From the moment the initiative was launched, the potential for conflict with the agreement between Switzerland and the EU on the freedom of movement has been under constant discussion. Three years after the vote, the Swiss Parliament has agreed on a new implementation law which tries to uphold the agreement with the EU on free movement – something that has been called “treason against the popular will” by the Swiss People’s Party.



In February 2017 Switzerland voted to ease citizenship for third-generation immigrants. The initiative was approved by over 60% of voters and a majority of cantons. This is a campaign poster showing support for this reform.

Image: campaign poster “Yes to a facilitated naturalisation of the 3rd generation”, concept and execution: Solidaridad Graphisme for Stopexclusion

MONEY AND POLITICS

SWISS EXCEPTIONALISM

Election and referendum campaigns are quite expensive. Since 2000, campaign spending has almost doubled every four years. Various sources estimate that the two biggest parties in Switzerland each spend millions of Swiss francs in an election year. This takes the average per capita cost to a higher level than in the United States, where money in politics is a hot issue. In contrast to the US there are no disclosure rules in place regarding financial transparency for political parties, making Switzerland the only country in Europe without regulations on the financing of political parties and election and referendum campaigns. This long-running issue receives regular criticism from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and from the Council of Europe's European Group of States against Corruption (GRECO).

DIRECT DEMOCRATIC OPTIONS AND HURDLES

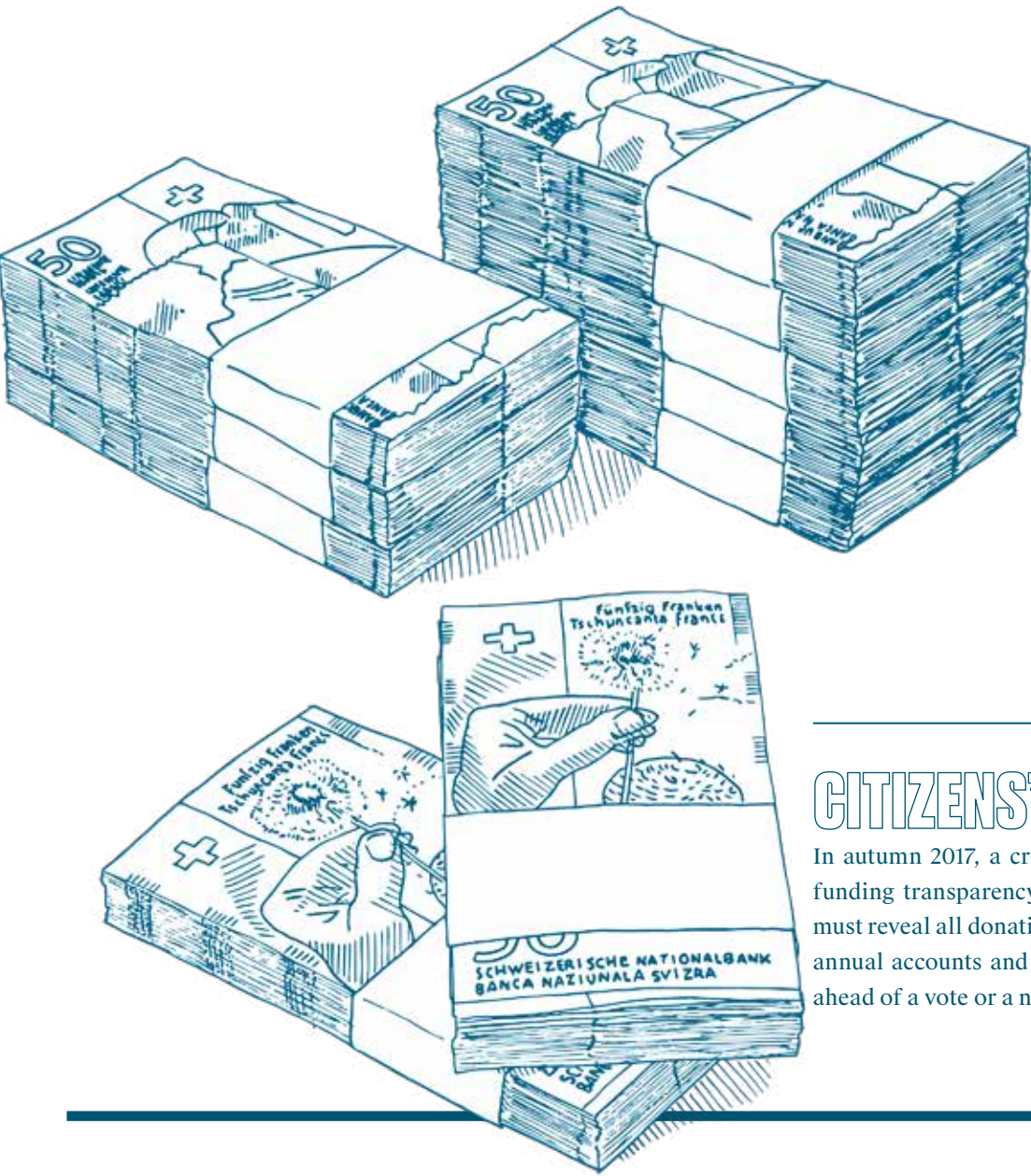
In a modern direct democracy, parties and other political groups have to bear additional costs in relation to popular votes on substantive issues: the signature collections and media campaigns may easily cost several Swiss francs per signature. This intensifies the discussion about funding in Swiss politics. Who stands behind a campaign? One factor which limits the costs of campaigns and diminishes the influence of financially strong interest groups is the ban on TV commercials for parties and voting campaigns in Switzerland. But as certain political parties with greater financial muscle have become more successful, questions about financial transparency have been raised in Parliament. In 2013, the government launched a consultation with Parliament and the political parties on this issue. But no solution could be found. While the main right and centre parties are standing their ground, the business community has taken steps towards greater transparency in recent years. On the other hand, the country's three largest banks – UBS, Credit Suisse and Raiffeisen, as well as the agro-food giant Nestlé, the insurance company AXA Winterthur and Swiss International Air Lines – have all decided to publish their donations to political parties. The Social Democratic Party of Switzerland has also published information on its finances.

CITIZENS' INITIATIVE FOR TRANSPARENCY

In autumn 2017, a cross-party group has successfully submitted an initiative demanding greater party funding transparency in an amendment to the Swiss constitution. The proposed text says that parties must reveal all donations over CHF 10,000 (or USD/EUR) that they receive. Parties must also publish their annual accounts and parties or candidates who spend over CHF 100,000 (or USD/EUR) on a campaign ahead of a vote or a national election must outline their total budget in advance.

Who is financing the campaign? In Switzerland you can't be sure about this since donations to political parties or organisations don't have to be disclosed. New proposals for more transparency face a lot of opposition.

Image: "Money", Presence Switzerland



THE GROWING WORLD OF PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

Political rights are on the rise. Half a century ago there were less than 40 countries worldwide which granted their citizens basic political and civil rights. Since then this number has more than tripled. According to the latest Freedom House index, 60% of the world's population enjoys basic political and civil liberties today – despite recent setbacks in many parts of the world. The same global trend is true for the instruments of modern direct democracy. More and more countries have introduced forms of initiative and referendum recently – especially at the local and regional levels.

POPULAR VOTES ON SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES ACROSS THE WORLD

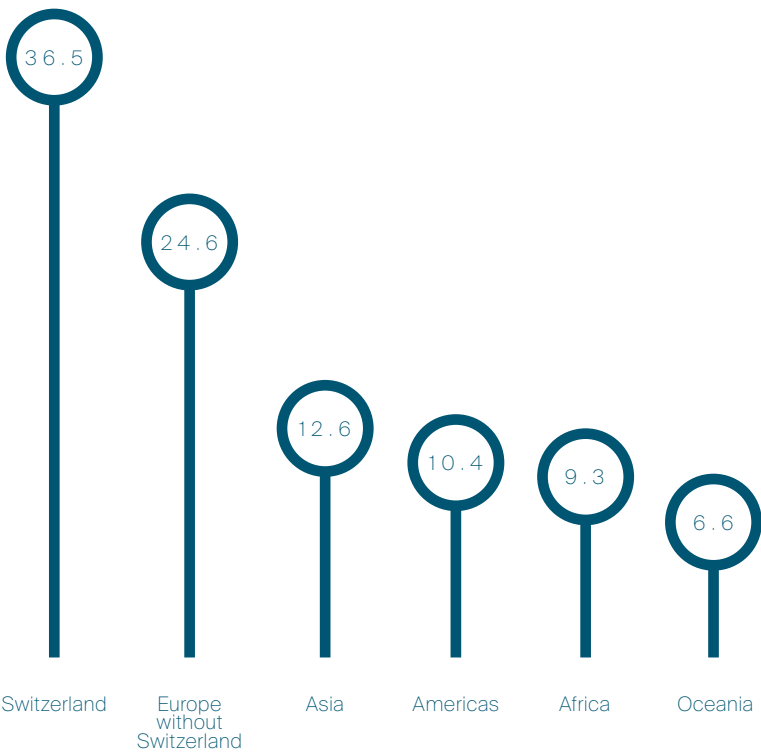
Over the past three decades, modern direct democracy has experienced an enormous boom. Well over half of all the 1706 national popular votes (until end of 2016) ever held in history have occurred in the past 30 years. Switzerland's share of these popular votes is 623 or 36.5% (Europe without Switzerland 422 votes/24.6%, Asia 213/12.6, Americas 176/10.4, Africa 159/9.3, Oceania 113/6.6). The same trend can be seen when it comes to the provisions of modern direct democracy as such: in 113 countries across the globe there are legally or constitutionally established rights of initiative and/or referendum available. While a number of countries – including Germany, the United States and India – do not have popular votes on substantive issues at the national level (yet), participatory politics have become very common at local and regional levels (including in the three aforementioned states).

PLEBISCITES ARE NOT REFERENDUMS

While initiatives and referendums have been an established feature of politics in countries like Switzerland, Uruguay and in many of the states in America for more than a century, direct democratic processes have been more recent additions in many countries – and in many cases they do not yet compare very well with other legislative institutions. The most obvious contradiction has occurred in countries where elected leaders have called popular votes to legitimise hot political issues of their own choice. This top-down use of issue voting is well known for creating big political risks for the respective leaders – recent examples include Brexit and the failed constitutional reform in Italy. But, more troubling still, it fails to offer a sustainable form of civic empowerment since such votes come from executive authority, rather than being enshrined in legislation that allows for an active electorate. A key lesson to be learned is, therefore, that such plebiscites are not the same as bottom-up initiatives and referendums. Switzerland has no plebiscites at all.

Share (in %) of popular votes in the world according to continent.

Graph: "Popular votes", data: Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI); design: Presence Switzerland



INITIATIVES AND REFERENDUMS IN EUROPE – AND ON EUROPE

STRIKING SIMILARITIES...

After the Second World War, the European integration process brought together many former enemies into one political community. Today, 28 different countries are members of the EU with one on the way out and half a dozen negotiating a membership treaty. Although a non-EU member state, Switzerland as a political community has many similarities with the much bigger EU. Both the EU and Switzerland are federations with more than 25 member states, each of which retain a large degree of political autonomy and sovereignty.

...AND MANY DIFFERENCES

But whereas in Switzerland political competencies are distributed on the basis of a special requirement for uniformity, in the EU the competencies are mostly divided according to thematic areas. Customs, for example, lie within the authority of the EU while health services rest in the competence of the individual member states. There are also differences in the division of power between the legislative and the executive: in the EU this division is not as clearly outlined as in Switzerland. Compared to national parliaments, the European Parliament, for instance, is not a fully-fledged law-making body; it is rather a democratic symbol at the transnational level.

DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE MAKING

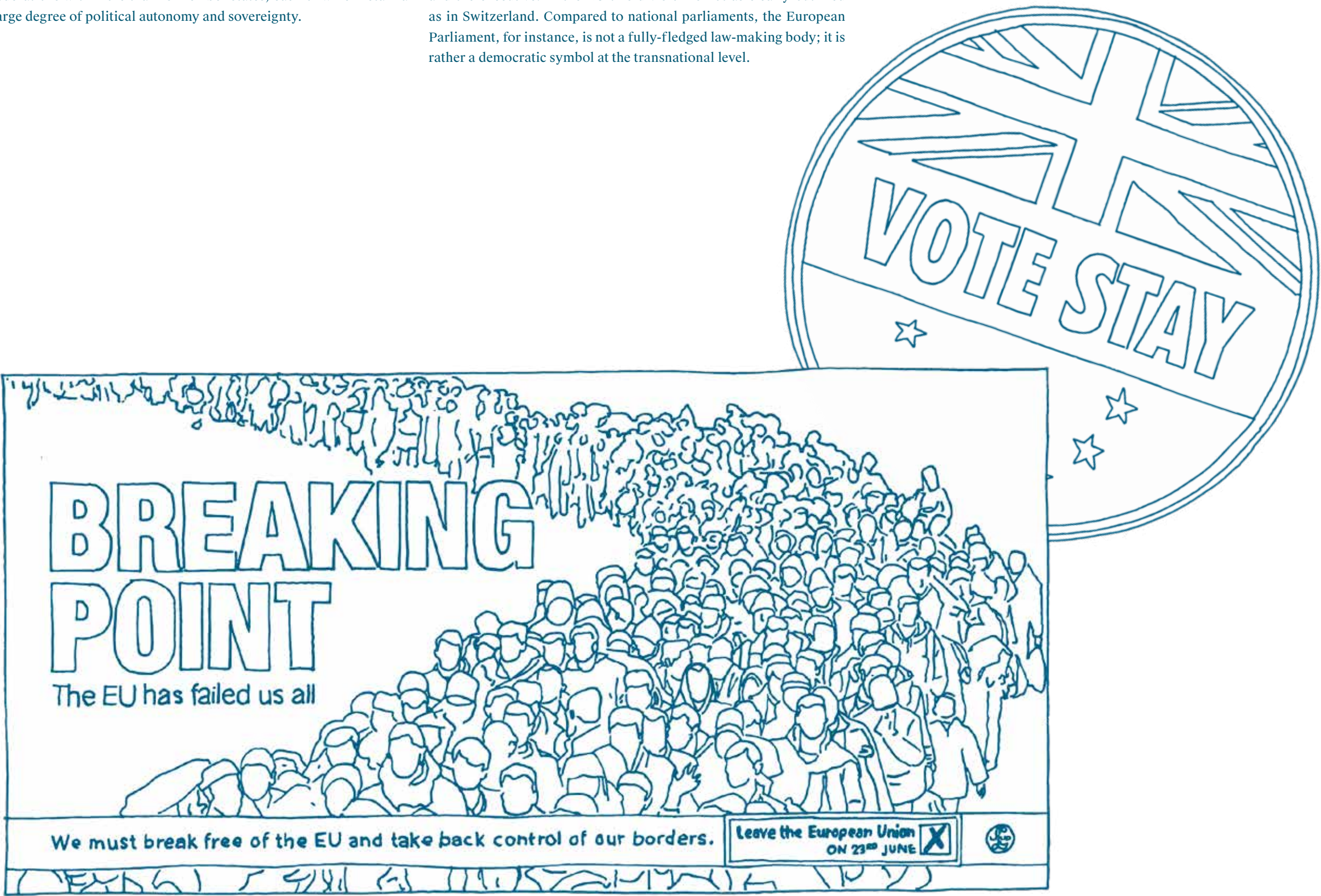
The use and importance of direct democratic tools, both in Switzerland and the EU, have grown in recent years, with more than 60 nationwide popular votes in more than 25 European countries dealing with European integration issues alone. This development began as late as the mid-1970s, when the original post-war incentive for integration in Europe was flagged and issues around EU membership and the common currency were debated. Most recently, popular votes have mirrored the deep crisis of the European integration project – with negative ballot decisions in a series of countries, such as Greece (on a bailout deal), the Netherlands (on an association agreement), Hungary (on refugee quotas) and above all in the United Kingdom (on membership).

THE EUROPEAN CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE

The introduction of a pan-European popular vote was on the agenda of the 2002-3 constitutional convention, but never received enough support to make it into the basic laws of the EU. Another feature of modern direct democracy, the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) was, however, ultimately established. Since 2012, the ECI has offered at least one million citizens from at least seven member states the right to propose new EU legislation. However, this genuinely innovative approach at the transnational level has not yet been able to unleash its democratic potential, because most EU citizens are not familiar with this right and because the cumbersome procedures and rewards are not very attractive. However, in 2017 the EU decided to revise the Regulation of the European Citizens' Initiative in order to make the tool more citizen friendly.

In many countries, citizens have been able to vote on the European integration process. With the British decision to leave the EU ('Brexit') a new dimension has been added, questioning the European Union as a whole.

Images: "Breaking point", UKIP and "Stay in", the In Campaign Ltd



THE ROLE OF MODERN MEDIA

THE INFORMATION CHALLENGE

The media are a very important factor when it comes to political information. As citizens have a lot of power in direct democratic systems, the media have an even more important role in providing them with information. Freedom of the press is highly valued in Switzerland. There are different print and TV media at the national and regional levels. While the print sector is dominated by private publishers, TV and radio have one major player at the national level: the publicly financed Swiss Broadcasting Company. Additionally, the federal government has a legal duty to inform citizens ahead of popular votes.

GOING ONLINE AND RETAINING QUALITY

In recent years, the rise of internet-based (social) media and free daily newspapers has diminished the influence of the classic print and TV-radio providers. As a consequence, there are now many question marks over the quality of information being delivered to the people. For modern direct democracy these developments include many new opportunities as it becomes easier and less expensive for initiative and referendum groups to spread the word, and for campaigns to create public momentum ahead of popular votes.

#DEARDEMOCRACY – OR: HOW TO REINVENT PARTICIPATORY JOURNALISM

In an effort to fulfil its traditional role as part of the democratic infrastructure, the international service of the Swiss Broadcasting Company, swissinfo.ch (which publishes online in ten languages), was mandated by the Swiss government in the mid-2010s to develop a platform for participatory journalism. Under the hashtag #deardemocracy, this multilingual platform offers stories around Swiss practices of modern direct democracy at the national level. It also gives insights into the multi-faceted local and regional practices. In these ways, swissinfo.ch invites stakeholders to make their voices heard. It is a new form of reporting on and supporting both nationwide and global conversations on the many options and limits of modern people power – and it can also be used for educational purposes, as a modern democracy requires not just a well-informed, but also a truly knowledgeable electorate.

The ‘Youth Session’ is held once a year at the Swiss Parliament in Bern. In a majority of cantons there are youth parliaments which serve as platforms for politically committed and active young citizens.

Image: “Youth session”,
Presence Switzerland

BRINGING IN THE YOUNG – THROUGH EDUCATION AND MEDIA

UNREPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

People in Switzerland are very often confronted with political decisions. This requires deep consideration of the subjects involved and a great readiness to participate in popular votes. One big challenge for this kind of very active and continuous democratic practice in Switzerland is, however, the generation gap. While more than 70% of the electorate over 70 years old generally participate in elections and referendums, less than one third of the youngest voters (less than 25 years of age) does the same. This ultimately contributes to rather unrepresentative political outcomes.

THE POTENTIAL OF CIVIC EDUCATION

The same phenomenon of an active older and passive younger electorate has been registered in many countries in recent years. Local and regional parliaments in particular are mainly composed of elderly citizens, while the turnout rates for younger voters are far lower than the average. In these countries, including Switzerland, few efforts have been made to include civic education for active citizenship and participatory democracy in the curricula of primary and secondary schools.

EASYVOTE.CH

In Switzerland, the frequent use of popular votes and the continuous opportunity to launch and sign new proposals have contributed to the establishment of new initiatives for the support of young citizens, including the lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16 years (in the canton of Glarus, only for cantonal issues). Another such move has been made by the Association of Swiss Youth Parliaments and the launch of the easyvote.ch platform. Here, a team of young political scientists, journalists, web designers and entrepreneurs have created a website in three languages offering alerts, analysis and social media channels especially for young citizens not yet used to the continuous activity involved in being Swiss citizens.

AN EVENING WITH THE MAYOR (OR AMBASSADOR)

A more traditional (but no less fun) form of introducing the rights and duties to young citizens is celebrated across Switzerland – and in fact also by a growing number of Swiss embassies and other representations across the globe. The Jungbürgerfeier (‘Celebration for Young Citizens’) is an event to which young Swiss people who have recently come of voting age (in most cases 18, in the canton of Glarus 16) are invited to be briefed about modern direct democracy at all political levels.



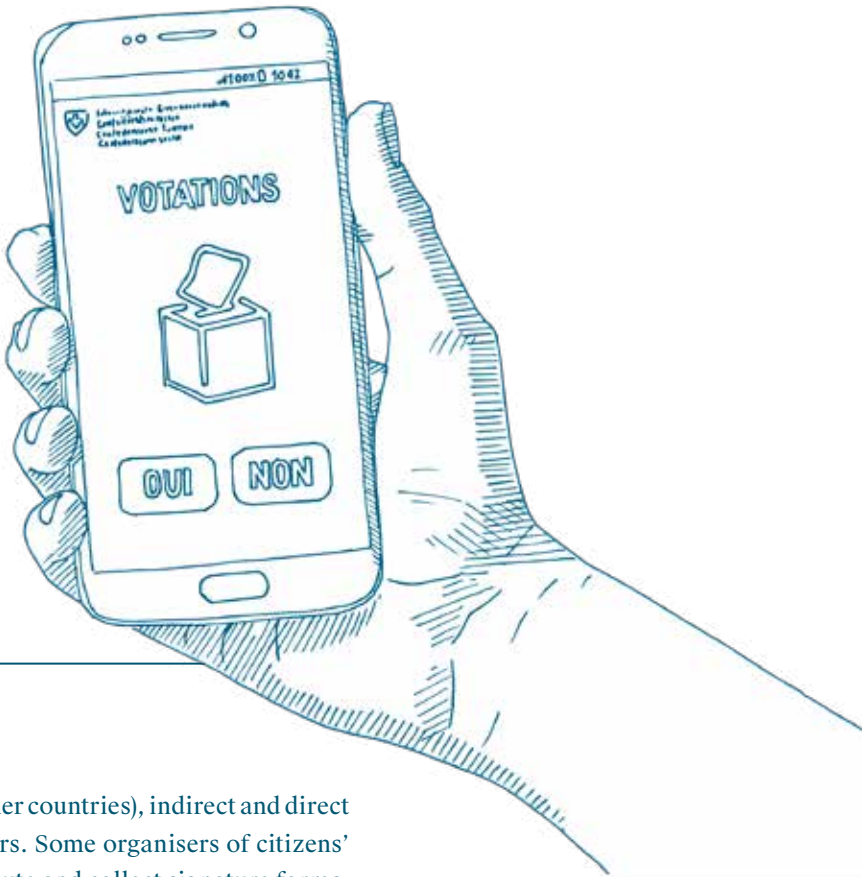
ONLINE DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE MAKING

MAJOR DIGITAL CHANGES

Society has undergone major changes during the last 25 years, mainly because of technological innovations. The internet has become an indispensable tool for most people. This creates new requirements and possibilities – not least when it comes to democratic practices. While the internet has taken over much of direct interaction between citizens and their national or local government offices (like applying for a license or filling in tax returns), and while political communication and campaigning have also become more digital in nature – the formal act of voting for a candidate or an issue is still performed non-electronically.

SINCE THE TURN OF THE MILLENIUM

Switzerland is not only a global pioneer in providing a full set of participatory and direct democratic rights and tools. In fact, this small country has also been an early initiator in introducing forms of e-voting, along with Estonia (where, however, there are as yet no citizens' initiatives or popular referendums). In addition, the extensive use of postal voting (which was introduced in all cantons in the 1980s and 1990s) has provided voters and electoral administrators with a great deal of experience in lengthy and remote voting processes. This made it possible, at the beginning of this century, for the Swiss government to decide to allow the first binding e-voting trials.



Digital technology has made life easier. But when it comes to democracy there are still many hurdles and challenges to meet. Switzerland has been a pioneer in introducing and developing e-voting. By 2019 two thirds of the cantons shall have the possibility to vote via internet.

Image: "The future of e-voting?", Presence Switzerland

TWO THIRDS BY 2019

From the very start, e-voting in Switzerland has been similar to a roller-coaster ride. Though e-votes have been little disturbed by irregularities or hacking, both authorities and citizens have been rather cautious about embracing the new digital opportunities. After initial tests in a few communes, several cantons introduced their own e-voting systems in the late 2000s, in most cases offering them mainly to their electorate abroad. However, for security reasons, the government had to stop several cantons from introducing e-voting for the 2015 parliamentary elections. By February 2017 only about 150,000 citizens were able to use the electronic form of voting (across six out of 26 cantons). Nevertheless, Switzerland has been a pioneer in introducing and developing e-voting. By 2019 two thirds of the cantons shall have the possibility to vote via the internet.

EUROPEAN INITIATIVE PIONEERS

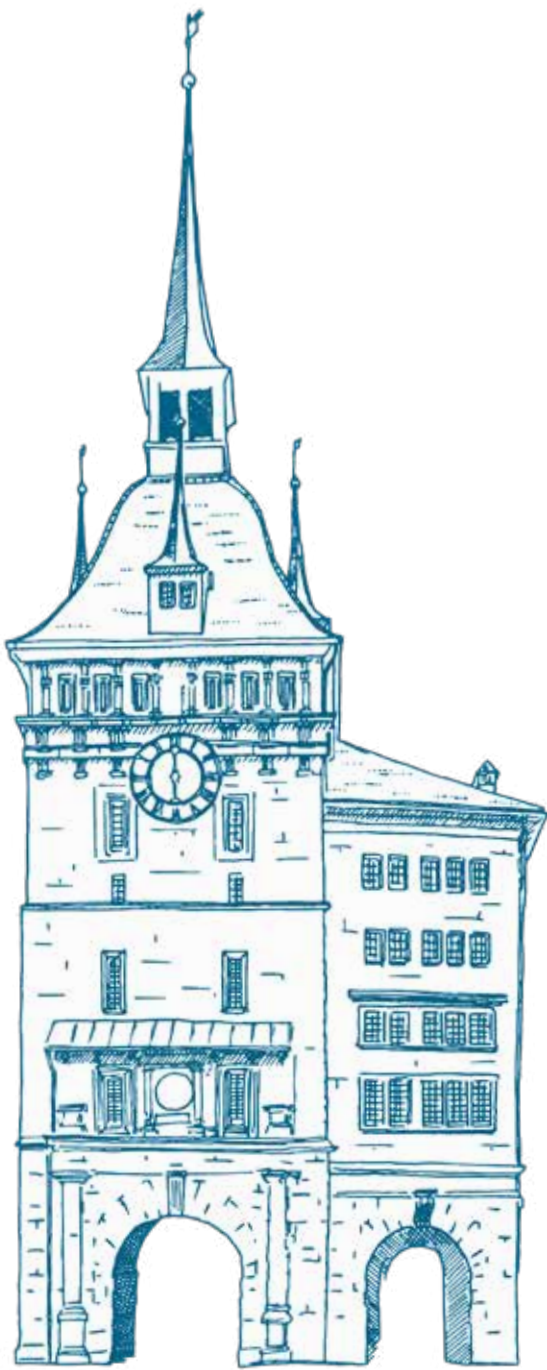
While proper e-voting is hard to sell in Switzerland (and even more so in other countries), indirect and direct forms of electronic signature gathering have made progress in recent years. Some organisers of citizens' initiatives in Switzerland are now using crowdfunding platforms to distribute and collect signature forms. A more formal approach has been taken by the EU, where the e-collection of 'statements of support' is the way most organisers of European Citizens' Initiatives (a transnational right to place an issue on the EU agenda) are looking for support nowadays. Since 2012 more than 60 pan-European initiatives have been launched – with most of them gathering their signatures online.

NEXT STOP CITY HALL

The use of modern direct democracy instruments has grown across the world. This happens most dynamically at the local level, where many city halls on all continents have become powerhouses for active citizenship and participatory democracy. In Switzerland and beyond, this development has contributed to the establishment of participatory infrastructures, as the following examples illustrate.

FROM PRISON TO DEMOCRACY CENTER

When climbing the stairs of the 13th-century Käfigturm in the heart of the Swiss capital Bern, you do not just end up in an information centre on democracy; the thick walls of the former fortified tower, which later became a prison, are also a venue for political events and exhibitions. What's special about these rooms, located in a prime spot near the Swiss parliament building, is that the authorities rent them out free of charge. Those visiting Switzerland to find out more about our political system will most certainly pop into the Käfigturm sooner or later. In recent years, hundreds of visitor groups from abroad have had a look at this former prison and seen the advantages of the ideas and practices behind this popular facility. This has led to the creation of copies of the political forum – of various sizes – all over the world.



The Käfigturm, a former fortified tower and prison in the heart of Bern's old city, has been transformed into an open political and democratic forum. It has inspired city halls across the globe to become more citizen-oriented.

Image: "Käfigturm", Presence Switzerland

SEOUL, SAN SEBASTIAN, FALUN

The most impressive example is undoubtedly the seven-story Citizens' Hall in the South Korean capital Seoul, which was created after a delegation of experts visited Bern in 2008. Another example is the Public Access Room in the Hawaii State Capitol in Honolulu, where citizens get official support when exercising their political rights. These physical facilities are increasingly complemented by online platforms offering advice and support for citizens regardless of the time or place. Europe has not been idle and has created several democracy fora. One example is the Basque town of Donostia-San Sebastian where a former prison under General Franco's dictatorship has been converted into a centre for citizen participation. In a place where people used to be tortured for expressing their opinions, they now receive advice on how to exercise their rights by a team of nine advisors. Going north you will find the old mining city of Falun in Sweden, where the main library hosts a democracy centre. There, citizens receive all the support they need to make their voices heard – including a 'democracy passport'.

GLOBAL PASSPORT TO MODERN DIRECT DEMOCRACY – WITH SWISS SUPPORT

SWITZERLAND, A NATURAL REFERENCE POINT

Out of 1700 national votes in more than 100 countries around the world, more than one third (36.6%) have been held in Switzerland. In addition to these national votes, there have been thousands of cantonal and local ones. In terms of time and usage, this makes Switzerland one of the most experienced places on earth and a natural reference point in discussions and proposals regarding the development of modern representative democracies featuring strong elements of initiative and referendum rights. This is why governmental and non-governmental bodies are important partners and supporters in knowledge exchange across the globe.

ACTIVE DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

In collaboration with independent experts, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs has produced informational material on modern direct democracy – initially in print and electronic media, such as DVDs and USB sticks, and now mainly available online. The current exhibition is an example of this kind of contribution and support, which also extends to participation in international conferences (like the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy) and membership of governmental organisations such as the Council of Europe, International IDEA and the UN Development Programme, where political and educational efforts for sustainable democracy have been made. Switzerland also provides first class research centres on modern direct democracy, including the Centre for Democratic Studies in Aarau (ZDA) and the National Center of Competence in Research (NCCR) Democracy at Zurich University.

#DEARDEMOCRACY – FOR AND BY CITIZENS

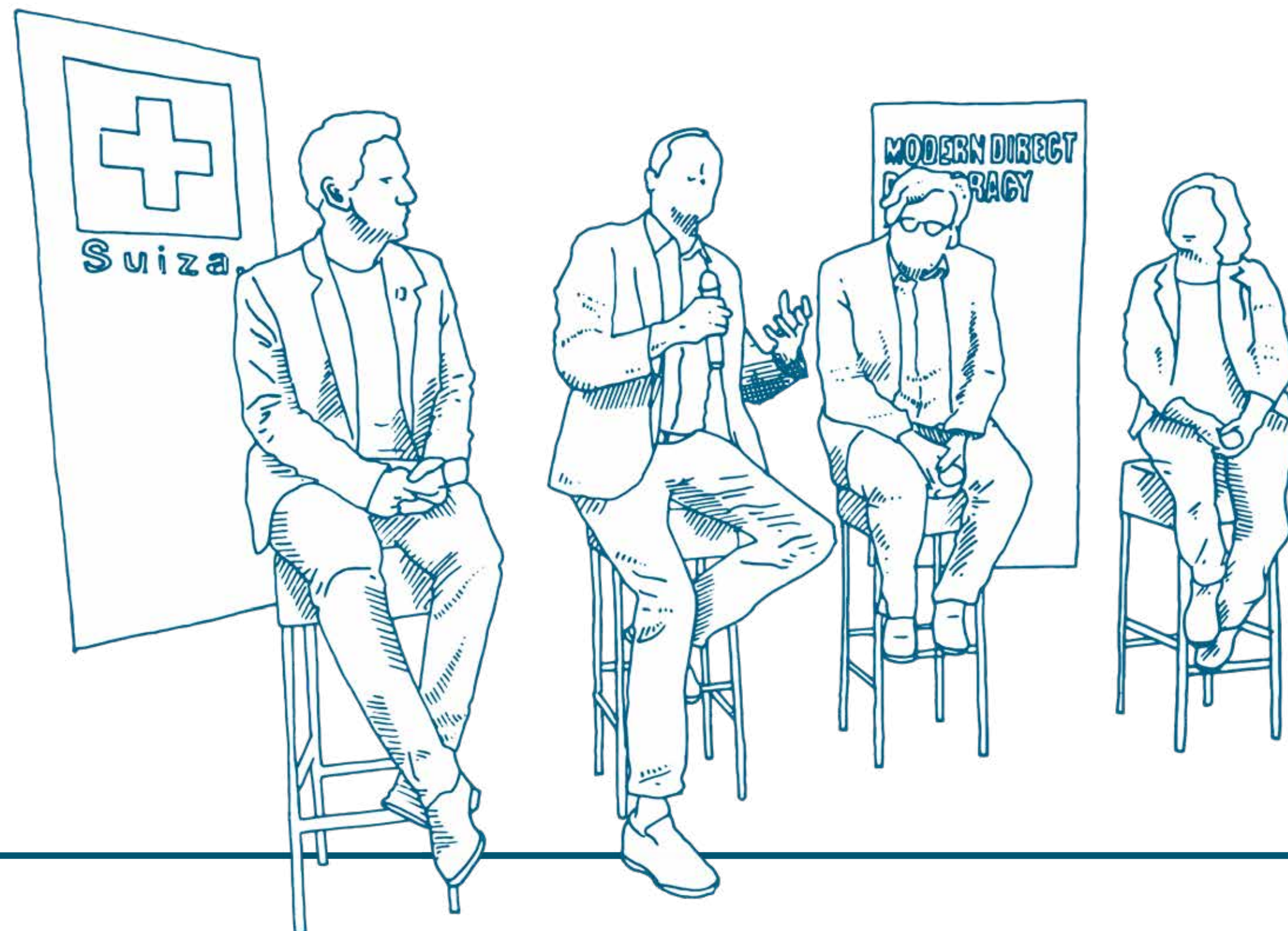
The Swiss government has also tasked the Swiss Broadcasting Company with developing citizen journalism and participatory media in the long term. As a consequence, the international service of the public-service broadcaster now offers a special online platform on modern direct democracy in ten key global languages (swissinfo.ch/eng/directdemocracy). The name of the platform #deardemocracy is also the social media hashtag. It focuses on stories, online conversations and analysis involving citizens at all levels of the political process. #deardemocracy offers stories, tools and answers to most of the questions you may have had about the options and limits of modern direct democracy.

NAVIGATING ACROSS THE GLOBE

Switzerland's contribution to global efforts and developments on participatory politics in terms of information and support are complemented by many projects hosted by the non-governmental Swiss Democracy Foundation, including an online 'Navigator to Direct Democracy' and the bi-annual World Conference on Active Citizenship: the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy. This gathering of (direct) democracy supporters from across the globe has seen six editions to date: in Aarau, Switzerland (2008); Seoul, Korea (2009); San Francisco, USA (2010); Montevideo, Uruguay (2012); Tunis, Tunisia (2015) and Donostia-San Sebastian, Spain (2016).

Switzerland has a lot of experience in balancing modern direct democratic practices with representative democracy – and an important message to deliver: never stop having a dialogue on #deardemocracy.

Image: "Panel discussion",
Presence Switzerland



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Image: "Crowd", admin.ch the portal of the Swiss government

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About Switzerland: aboutswitzerland.org

Swiss Democracy Foundation: swissdemocracy.foundation

Swissinfo: swissinfo.ch/eng/directdemocracy

People to Power: people2power.info

The Swiss Authorities online: ch.ch

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