

# Is there a future for direct democracy? : "The political class bears a huge responsibility"

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## "The political class bears a huge responsibility"

Switzerland's version of direct democracy is unique in the world. No other electorate has political rights as extensive as the Swiss. Professor Hanspeter Kriesi, Head of the University of Zurich Institute for Political Science, talks about how this came about and whether it will always remain so. Interview by Heinz Eckert

SWISS REVIEW: *Do the Swiss as a nation really exhibit exceptional political maturity?*

HANS PETER KRIESI: No, I don't think so. But there are international statistics indicating that the Swiss show an above-average interest in political issues. At the same time, this interest is no greater than that shown by the Dutch, Danes, Norwegians or Swedes. The Swiss are not politically more mature, but they do benefit from some very good instruments that help them make an informed decision.

*I ask the question because the former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt once said that the Germans were not ready for a Swiss-style direct democracy. He was afraid, for instance, that the Germans would immediately vote to re-introduce capital punishment.*

It's true that the Germans have a particularly difficult relationship with direct democracy. After all, in the Weimar Republic of the 1920s they prepared the ground for right-wing extremism. You have to remember that the results of referenda always depend on what and how the elite themselves are thinking. The outcome of a vote is never random and always dictated by the campaign ahead of the vote. In Switzerland, for example, voters always follow the government's lead if there is no notable opposition to a proposal. The more controversial a proposal, the higher the turnout and the more uncertain the outcome.

*So direct democracy also imposes major demands on the political class?*

Yes, of course. Direct democracy requires the political class, for example, to explain proposals to voters correctly, citing all the advantages and drawbacks as objectively as possible, and to address the sentiments of the population. Direct democracy calls for major transparency in the political arena.

*Does Switzerland take democracy further than any other nation?*

At the national level, certainly. There are a few American states that frequently invite their citizens to the ballot box. The Italians, too, are often asked to vote. But no other country goes as far as Switzerland.

*Why is Switzerland a special case in democratic terms?*

In the 19th century the country was swept by a strong democratic movement which developed the idea of a democratic model, based on traditional alpine societies with cooperative decision-making channels. This in turn gave rise to calls for greater co-determination on the part of the population in a representative democracy. The model, based on a traditional structure, proved highly successful first at the cantonal level and later at the national level. In 1874 the federal constitution was revised, and in 1891 the law on people's initiatives was introduced.

*Could our direct democracy not be an ideal model for the European Union?*

It's noticeable that more and more referenda related to the EU are being conducted in EU member countries. Direct democracy would certainly be a good way of redressing the EU's democratic deficiencies. Moreover, many politicians are already calling for citizens to be more closely involved in political decisions within the EU.

*Would the Swiss model actually be compatible with the EU if the latter does not shift more towards direct democracy?*

This question has long been a subject of discussion among constitutional lawyers, and the conclusion is that most referenda in Switzerland could still be carried out. The only exception would be agricultural issues. But the loss of democracy would be limited. However, these are minor considerations. You have to look at the problem from another angle: Our direct democracy will lose weight whatever happens. While we were able to vote on free movement of persons, our options

were very limited since a No would have damaged us so much that we would have subsequently regretted the decision. In other words, even as a non-member of the EU we are obliged to follow many of Brussels' decisions. You could call this an autonomous form of conformance, but the fact is that, when it comes to European policy, our autonomy is constrained. Like it or not, we must accept the fact that we are in the centre of Europe, and our laws are heavily influenced by our European neighbours.

*But Swiss voters have the political means to revoke the existing bilateral accords in a few years' time at the ballot box.*

De jure this is possible, but de facto it's an illusion. The fact is that we can't do it unless we want to lose out.

*Clearly, then, that means that direct democracy entails political risks.*

You mentioned Chancellor Schmidt earlier, and there are a few other people who see the risks inherent in direct democracy. Lots of opponents of direct democracy are afraid of the alleged incompetence of voters. Based on Swiss experience, however, we can categorically state that this fear is unfounded. Because, firstly, voters are not an independent body. The political positions they take, as I mentioned before, are heavily influenced by the political class. Secondly, social scientists have found that the electorate does not need to know every detail of a proposal, since it is frequently swayed by party manifestos or statements by political representatives. So voters don't need to know a lot in order to vote sensibly. The onus is on the political class, which bears a major responsibility here in Switzerland.

*In that case, were the political elite rather than the electorate to blame for rejecting the EEA in 1992?*

You're assuming, of course, that that decision was wrong and implying that the electorate voted wrongly. (laughs)



*In retrospect it was undoubtedly a mistake not to join the EEA. Perhaps even the biggest mistake that Swiss voters have ever made.*

I fully agree with you, though Federal Councillor Blocher takes a different view. Certainly, we experienced the most intensive referendum campaign of the past 20 years. It was perhaps even more intensive than the referenda on excessive immigration in the 1970s. And in 1992 the opposition was extremely well organised, waging its campaign more professionally than supporters of the proposal and disseminating anti-EEA propaganda months ahead of the referendum. The electorate was extremely well informed. The tough referendum campaign resulted in a very high turnout at the ballot box and mobilised members of the public who would otherwise not bother to vote. And experience shows that people who rarely vote are usually not very well informed. Given the narrow majority, you could say that it was they who ultimately tipped the scales against the EEA. The political elite did not fail, but it was divided. Hence the result.

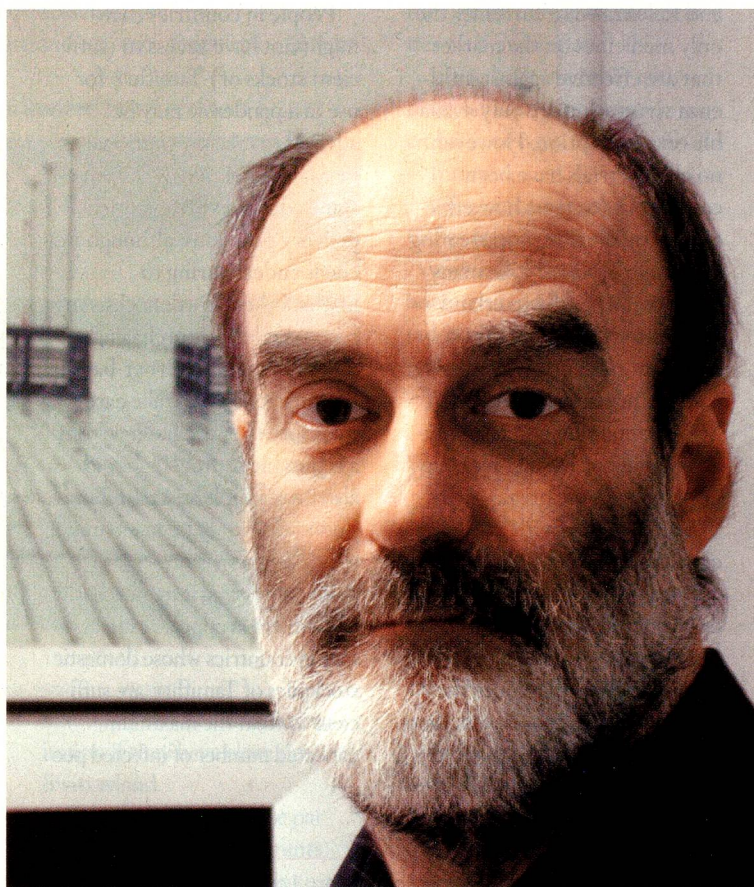
*Do you know of any similar instances?*

As I said, usually the electorate conducts itself very sensibly. But there have been other problems. The referendum against the revision of the law on invalidity insurance was attacked by disabled groups. So whoever was on the side of the disabled should have voted against the revision. Yet many failed to realise this. By the same token, lots of people voted against the proposal even though they shared the Federal Council's desire to create a financially sounder basis for invalidity insurance. That proposal was very difficult to communicate to voters.

*People keep talking about a reform backlog for which direct democracy could be said to be blamed. Which reforms have been impeded or delayed by the democratic process?*

As far as I can remember, it was mainly in the 1970s that a few reforms were delayed. For instance, several referenda on introduction of

VAT had to be held before the proposal was accepted. Obviously, Swiss voters had a problem with the modernisation of our indirect taxation system. The same happened with the law on women's right to vote, the constitutional article on the regulation of economic activity, and the zoning law. On balance one can say that things often take a little longer in Switzerland, but ultimately we make very few mistakes. Because all proposals subjected to several referenda are continually changed and adapted before they pass into law. Step-by-step politics has its benefits as well as drawbacks.



**HANSPETER KRIESI**

Hanspeter Kriesi is Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Zurich's Institute for Political Science, and Director of CIS (the Centre for Comparative and International Studies) at the ETH (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology) Zurich and the University of Zurich. Born in 1948, he studied sociology, social and economic history, constitutional law and social psychology at the University of Berne. Following two years' work as a scientific collaborator at the University of Educational Sciences, Aargau, he attended the University of Chicago between 1974 and 1975 and graduated with an MA in sociology. From 1975 to 1984 he worked at the University of Zurich's Institute of Sociology; he obtained his doctorate in 1976 and qualified as a university lecturer in 1980.

*Lastly there is the debate about the cantonal majority, which is said to result in progressive cities being dictated to by conservative rural populations. Must it be abolished?*

When it was introduced, the cantonal majority played an important role in resol-

ving the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, and in preventing the outbreak of civil war in our country. The cantonal majority was an important protective measure for small rural cantons with a Catholic majority. But since religious conflicts are a thing of the past and the small cantons no longer need to be protected, the cantonal majority has largely lost its *raison d'être*. Nowadays it only protects rural conservatives against reforms. What's more, the differences in the sizes of cantons have grown. For example, an Appenzell resident's vote carries much more weight nowadays than a Zurich resident's. And that is highly problematic from the standpoint of state policy.

*How could the cantonal majority be abolished? Surely the move would be rejected by a cantonal majority.*

Admittedly it would take a minor revolution to abolish the cantonal majority. But the introduction of a federal state in 1848 was also the result of a minor revolution. Perhaps we won't be able to avoid circumventing certain rules in future.

*Is that possible?*

Even when the new federal state was established, rules had to be circumvented. We have to deliberately violate existing rules in order to introduce a new rule.

*And who will do this? Parliament? The Federal Council?*

Let's say a majority of the political elite was in favour of abolishing the cantonal majority and the proposal was also accepted by a people's majority. This then begs the question of which majority the outcome should be based on: the majority of voters or the cantonal majority? Then the government would have to have the final say.

*But that would be against the constitution.*

That's right, and therein lies the minor revolution: the government would have to violate and amend the constitution based on a majority decision.