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CONTENTS

All about the elections

The challenges	4-6
Swiss Abroad for the National Council?	6/7
The elections: A guide	8/9
Three generations talk	16-18
Information hiccoughs	19
Woman power	21
Youth and politics – a contradiction?	22

Cover:

A Helvetia figure holding the world was erected in front of the federal parliament for the 700th anniversary in 1991. And in 1995 Swiss citizens living all over the world can vote for Helvetia's parliament for the first time. (Photo: Michael Stahl)

IMPRESSUM

Swiss Review, the magazine for the Swiss Abroad, is in its 22nd year of issue and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in more than 20 regional editions. It has a total circulation of over 310,000. Regional news appears four times a year.

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Make sure you vote! On October 22 federal elections are due to take place. For the first time Swiss Abroad entitled to vote will be able to participate by correspondence. The Swiss Review generally and particularly with this special number tries to ensure that you as voters are well informed. Parliamentary elections are less concrete and often less exciting than referendums on specific subjects. But it is precisely in a direct democracy with its numerous referendums – often having a strong polarising effect – that the importance of elections cannot be stressed highly enough.

In the 1991-1995 legislative period which is now coming to an end Swiss voters were able to pronounce upon no less than 52 bills. There were 12 popular initiatives, and on 22 occasions successful referendum demands against parliamentary decisions were voted on. These impressive statistics provide evidence of a well functioning direct democracy. But if we count the number of referendum demands and initiatives containing retroactive clauses, we see that half all referendums were aimed at cancelling decisions already reached by parliament.

Taking into account the No handed down by voters on a number of bills approved by parliament with a substantial majority (EEA, blue helmets, easier naturalisation, revision of the Lex Friedrich, etc.) this represents an acute problem of confidence. It is a fact that at present there is much talk of the increasing distance between the people and the so-called "political class" which is thought to be too far away from popular views. In my opinion this is short-sighted and is aired mostly by groups which hope to gain political credence by discrediting the government and parliament.

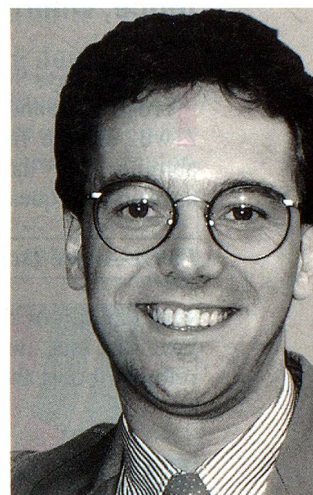
In the first place, in a direct democracy system like that of Switzerland

land the people alone may be considered to be the "political class" because they have the opportunity of pronouncing on practically all questions. 52 referendums in four years is ample proof of that! Secondly, the popular will is expressed in elections as well as referendums. There must be something wrong when there is less and less voter confidence in the very parliamentarians that voters themselves elected.

Of course the people always have the last word, and of course the people are always right. But if they are not at the same time prepared to give a certain amount of confidence to the politicians that they themselves chose then direct democracy cannot function in the long

run. There seems to be a trend for elections and the work of parliament in general to be losing significance compared with votes on practical questions. This could have disastrous consequences since in elections it is the general direction of policy over four years which is being decided and in particular setting the course on new issues. An election campaign here may be less spectacular than a referendum one because it lacks the polarisation effect, but it is in fact much more important; and a certain amount of agreement between voters and their elected representatives is part of a healthy direct democracy.

Voting in elections is a civic act with far-reaching implications. It gives those entitled to vote who live abroad the opportunity of playing a central role in completing the mosaic of direct democracy. So make sure you vote!



René L.

René Lenzin