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Of empowered citizens, economic growth and a strengthened society: Swiss direct democracy

In the National Business Review of January 27, 2012, guest columnist Steve Maharey, Vice-Chancellor of Massey University and former cabinet minister, stated that representative democracy is not enough. From my Swiss perspective, I could not agree more.

Like most Swiss, I am proud of our system of direct democracy. Direct democracy became established in Switzerland as early as in the 19th century as complement to indirect democracy and has been developed further since then. In hundreds of referendums over more than one hundred years, Swiss citizens have taken decisions on substantive political issues, on all levels of government be it national, in the cantons or in the local municipalities.

Two criteria define direct democracy

1. Direct democracy makes decisions about substantive issues, not about people.
2. Direct-democratic procedures serve to empower citizens; they are not initiated and controlled from government ("top down"), but from the people ("bottom-up").

Plebiscites or popular vote procedures which are initiated by government are not part of a direct democracy. Unfortunately, plebiscitary and direct-democratic popular vote procedures are often confused. In a genuine direct democracy, the constitution and the law clearly stipulate when it is mandatory for the citizens to be consulted, and when the citizens can decide for themselves that they have to be consulted. In Switzerland, direct democracy means that a referendum process takes place either because a group of voters demands it, or because it is stipulated in the constitution.

Direct democracy means that the citizens can place an issue on the political agenda. An issue, for instance, which the authorities and political parties have either neglected or deliberately ignored. Direct-democratic rights raise the status of citizens to that of occasional politicians.

It could look as if direct democracy weakens Parliament. In fact, quite the opposite is the case. Parliament is actually strengthened because its decisions are given the implicit or explicit approval of the people.

In a direct democracy, citizens and politicians are interconnected and interdependent. The referendum and initiative rights enjoyed by Swiss citizens give them decision-making power, a decision-making power which is independent of government and which allows them not only to object and resist but to participate constructively in the shaping of state and society. Direct-democratic procedures empower voters and serve as mechanisms of power-sharing. This is especially important for minorities whose interests may only inadequately be represented in government and parliament - a particularly important feature in a multicultural country such as Switzerland.

Direct-democratic rights reduce the risk of people resorting to violence. They channel protest and dissatisfaction away from the streets and into a regulated decision-making process. Direct-democratic rights act as a sensor for unresolved social problems and conflicts and allow for measuring the pulse of society. They often act as an early warning system, letting politicians know where there seems to be a problem. In this way, direct democracy brings politicians closer to citizens.

And, as research shows, direct democratic rights promote economic growth. In cantons with stronger rights of participation on financial issues, economic performance is 15% higher. In cantons where citizens can vote on the budget, there is 30% less tax-avoidance. In municipalities where the budget has to be approved by referendum, public expenditure is 10% lower. Municipalities which have the finance referendum have 25% lower public debt. And public services cost less in towns and cities with direct democracy.

The example of Switzerland proves the often heard myth of the incompetent citizen and the myth that direct democracy puts a brake on economic progress wrong. It proves that direct democracy not only empowers citizens, but adds to their economic as well as overall well-being. It comes as no surprise that Switzerland and its citizens rank among the happiest in the world.

Marion Weichelt, Ambassador of Switzerland



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