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## Open-air assembly



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## LANDSGEMEINDE - something special about the government of Appenzell

What is it? Literally "Land" means "country" or "nation" and "Gemeinde" can be translated as "community" or "congregation". Landsgemeinde is Democracy in action, on the town square, where the adults of the community vote on relevant matters of legislation once a year, and elect their government. Similar assemblies have been around in many countries for a long time. Ancient Greeks developed a system of direct democracy in the 5th century BC. In order to vote one had to be an 'adult, male citizen'.

### Appenzell Landsgemeinde facts

2 cantons have Landsgemeinden now - Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus. Appenzell holds its Landsgemeinde on the last Sunday in April, Glarus on the first Sunday in May.

8 cantons had Landsgemeinden until 1848. They were a group of adjacent cantons in central Switzerland, and the two Appenzells (Ausserrhoden and Innerrhoden).

Some arguments against the Landsgemeinde were: It was not easy for everyone to get there, sick people or the elderly missed out. Vote counting with shows of hands was difficult and could be inaccurate. Voting participation was less than with votes through a ballot box. There was no secrecy. And at times there were verbal and physical fights. In some places the sheer numbers of people voting proved too large for the squares to hold.

1 hour 46 minutes was the duration of the most recent Landsgemeinde in Appenzell on 28 April 2014. The first 25 minutes were taken up with the entry of the dignities, then followed the opening speech by the Landammann (Mayor), before the Landsgemeinde was declared officially opened. After a talk about the current situation in Appenzell, elections were held and the office holders sworn in - Mayor, deputy Mayor, Standeskommission (government), Judges. Finally several initiatives and proposals were voted on - changes of financial thresholds, changes in tax law, electronic data collection for records of properties, access to social workers for all schools. The most controversial issue was a credit for a shared walker / bicycle track, which was eventually accepted. These are all very common election themes worldwide!

The earliest written mention of the Landsgemeinde in Switzerland dates to 1403. However it is likely that it existed prior to that.

The most famous controversy surrounding Landsgemeinde in recent years occurred in 1991. This was the first year where women participated in the Landsgemeinde in Appenzell Innerrhoden. Appenzell Innerrhoden was the last canton in Switzerland to give women the vote. Not that the men of Appenzell had a say in it (they had voted in 1990 to NOT allow women to vote). A lady

from Appenzell complained to the Swiss Federal Court about discrimination, her complaint was upheld and the men were ordered to have women in their midst. Appenzell Ausserrhoden had given their women the right to participate in the previous year.

In 1997 Appenzell Ausserrhoden voted to stop holding their Landsgemeinde. In 2010 a citizen's initiative in Appenzell Ausserrhoden to re-introduce the Landsgemeinde was rejected by 70% of the voters.

The next scheduled Landsgemeinde is for April 26, 2015 at 12.00 midday in Switzerland (or 10pm NZ time).

Nelly Steinemann

<http://www.appenzellerzeitung.ch>, [www.ai.ch](http://www.ai.ch)



source: Archiv Appenzellerland Tourismus AI

Rhodes ensign officers with their colourful banners taking part in the procession



Photo: E. Grubenmann

Until 1991, a sword served as the only form of voting identification. Since then, a voting card has served as authorisation to participate