

Direct Democracy in Switzerland

Discoveries from a political test tube

by

Gregory Fossedal

Si le théâtre est petit, a donc le spectacle de la grandeur.

Alexis de Tocqueville

We should all be grateful to Senator Gravel, Don Kemner, and their colleagues for bringing us together: first, here on the internet, and then in a few days at the Democracy Summit in Williamsburg, VA, over Presidents' Day Weekend of 2002. Theirs is a powerful and important idea; an idea, which may, one day, help liberate the world. I'm honored, and trust you are too, to be part of their public-interest conspiracy.

A few years ago, I started work on a study of Switzerland's political and economic culture, initially entitled "Democracy in Switzerland." This book became, over some months spent among the Swiss and a couple years of writing and revising, "*Direct* Democracy in Switzerland." But, honestly, this was not exactly what I sought. It's what I discovered.

I went to Switzerland to figure out why the country has such a low rate of violent crime; how a country can be so tenaciously armed yet so patiently neutral; why there is such social harmony in the face of religious and linguistic diversity; why the companies are so competitive internationally and the people, in general, so broadly and evenly prosperous; how it is that abortion, though virtually outlawed in some places and positively subsidized in others, does not seem to be as bitterly contested as it is in the U.S.; and a myriad of similar questions. What I found was that each of these strands of the cloth connects back to something at the center. There is a subtly different spirit of the law.

Hence my book did not start out as, but it did become, a study of *Direct Democracy in Switzerland*. In fact, the word "Direct" was not added until I was on the second draft of the book. If you go to the web page for it at www.adti.net, it's still not in the graphic.

Fortunately, you don't have to go through all this, because I've summarized several years of listening and thinking into a few hours of reading. It can save you a lot of time. For example, if you are interested in how direct democracy works, and what the debate and battle for it is likely to look like in other countries, you can learn much from the Swiss. With this unabashed plug out of the way, however, there are discoveries I'd like to share about the distinctive impacts and tendencies of direct democracy in Switzerland, and which take only a few minutes.

1. Citizenship / Voluntarism

It is difficult to quantify, but from spending much time there, my estimate would be that the typical Swiss spends perhaps 50 to 75 percent more time per week than a comparable Western European adult on civic, church, and other volunteer activities, and say 25 to 35 percent more than a typical American.

The typical Swiss town is run by unpaid council members. The local schools are operated, for the most part, directly by parents, rather than by officials who report only indirectly and periodically to the parents. Parents, for example, hire the teachers in most cantons. The cantonal parliaments, and even the federal parliament, are populated mainly by people who keep their regular job. About one third of the members of the Supreme Court are non-lawyers, and the body does not really review cases for constitutionality because, as any number of Swiss put it to me, “that is already done by the people.”

This is not to say the spirit of “let’s roll” is dead in America or other parts of the West, especially over the last several months. It does seem to me, however, to be at a high level among the Swiss, and to be a very steady fact of life.

Now, Swiss voluntarism or citizenship is not the product merely of direct democracy. It arises from many factors. One is the country’s policy of near universal male military service, which raises civic time directly and inculcates an ethic of service indirectly. As well, Swiss federalism leaves many tasks, from important environmental policy questions to decisions about immigration and citizenship, and real management of the local schools, up to locals. And not just local “officials,” but to the people. Federalism thus plays a role as well.

But there is no escaping the pervasive and subtle message of a political culture in which many of the major questions of state, and nearly all controversial ones, are referred directly to citizens – most of them, repeatedly. The message to the voter is, “you are competent to take care of your own affairs. In fact, it’s your responsibility.” In a very real way, Switzerland is a nation with some million members of the legislature. This accounts, in part, for a second observation about the Swiss.

2. People’s Competence

Development economists often wonder whether a given people are “ready” for democracy. The assumption is that until they have attained a certain level of formal education, wealth, or other achievements, they are not quite fit for self-government.

The Swiss, by many statistical measures, are extremely “ready.” Their rate of newspaper readership is rivaled only by that, for some reason, of the Norwegians, and it must be remembered that a significant number of Swiss read in two or more languages. Swiss performance on standardized math and reading tests is high, even though the country has a significant plurality, for such a wealthy country, of persons who do not attend graduate school or even the university. Their facility with language is legend, and while a necessity in the case of French and German, now extends even to English.

I found, in very general terms, that many Swiss were not as well informed about their leading politicians as one might see in the United States or most of Europe. (It is possible to read the front page of a Swiss newspaper several days in a row and not see the president’s name.) They were, however, more knowledgeable in general about policy issues, and seem to feel they have more of a stake in settling them, than is common in more indirect democracies. The same holds true even of world affairs, though in part this reflects the simple fact that in Switzerland, if something happens 100 miles away, it is very likely “overseas news.”

Does this high level of sophistication make the Swiss fit for direct democracy, or has their direct democracy helped produce a highly capable and skilled electorate? There is clearly some causality moving in both directions. If we consider Switzerland's position in the 19th Century, however, compared to today, there is some evidence that faith in the people's capacity to govern helped raise that capacity itself.

It is interesting to note that at each stage of the evolution of direct democracy in Switzerland, the competence of the very people we now find so advanced was called into question. Federal questions, it was argued in the 1890, were too vast and complicated an arena for the people to write laws through initiative. Earlier, in the 1840s and 1850s, in cantons and communes such as Zurich, those nervous about direct democracy argued that it was a fine institution for simple rural areas such as Appenzell and St. Gallen, but that the un-propertied and less homogenous voters of the city would find it extremely complicated.... the substantive equivalent of a butterfly ballot.

The country's newspaper of record, the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, derives its name in part from this fact. It was founded by a populist visionary who argued that expanding the institutions of democracy would create a new citizen for Zurich, a "neue Züricher."

Not long ago, one of my sons asked me if I thought the people of our country, and other countries, were capable of operating a direct democracy like Switzerland. "Well, I think so, but I'm not completely sure," I told him honestly. "That may be why we need it."

3. Money and Politics

Switzerland is rich, complicated, and, in an economic and diplomatic sense, powerful in world affairs. Swiss decisions about environmental policy have an impact on all of Europe. Swiss pharmaceutical, engineering, and other firms enjoy a position in world equity markets that rivals that of Germany and Japan. The country does about one third to one half of the world's international private investment banking.

Accordingly, one would think that Switzerland might be overrun with influence peddlers, political action committees, soft dollars. Instead, what I found was that in the capital city of Bern, there is no listing in the yellow pages for the equivalent of "lobbyist." There are, I discovered after many interviews, a few lawyers and one or two party leaders who in effect take on this assignment, but it is relatively small. Likewise, there is much corporate lobbying taken on by executives themselves, not outsourced to lobbying firms as such. But it is not, for some reason, as important or consuming an activity or a point of controversy for the Swiss.

Likewise, spending on Swiss campaigns is extremely low. The typical candidate for the federal parliament spends perhaps \$10,000 to \$50,000, and anything more than that raises doubts. Even if we calculate this in a per capita basis, it comes to a modest dollar or two a person, and, since Switzerland is a parliamentary system, there are no big-ticket expenditures for the presidential race at all.

Perhaps more remarkable, the Swiss do not have elaborate limits on political spending. There are no caps on spending for races for office. In fact, there isn't even disclosure. (I would not necessarily recommend that other countries imitate this latter policy, but it is striking that it exists side by side with such a restrained system of campaign finance.)

Even the most emotional campaigns on issues tend not to be personal, nor, in general, are politics in the parliament or the administration. There has been only one major resignation from the Swiss cabinet over an ethics issue in the last 100 years.

Spending on some federal initiative campaigns sometimes reaches into the millions, but it is worth noting that even these efforts, while sometimes highly rhetorical, also serve some educational function on issues. The most effective political advertisements and lobbying efforts, in my experience, contain information. I do not say they are purely informative and unemotional; far from it. But they contain information. And notice that this kind of “lobbying,” if you will, is directed at the people.

One restriction the Swiss do have is a de facto ban on political advertising for television. This does not have the same impact it might in the United States, because the Swiss are relatively less dependent on TV for information and entertainment. Nor has it made for dull campaigns or colorless campaigning. Newspaper and billboard advertisements have taken the place of the spot commercial.

In any case, though, this is one factor in the lower concern Swiss have for the role of money in politics that flows from regulation, more than the presence of direct democracy.

Another factor is the dispersion of power geographically, with the cantons and communes spending about 70 percent of money spent by government at all levels, and local cantonal courts only very rarely overruled by the federal courts on appeal.

As well, as we have noted, Swiss voters are sophisticated, and do not necessarily buy the brand of laundry detergent that spends the most on advertising. In a recent high profile initiative on the Swiss military, government policy was challenged by a coalition that outspend its opponents by a factor of perhaps ten or twenty. The Swiss voted against the high spenders, in part because their spending itself became an issue. Likewise, though there are no federal and few cantonal term limits, the list of members who spend longer than 10 years in parliament is much smaller than in most of the West. Partly this is because the pay is low and the staff and support are virtually zero. It also, however, demonstrates that the Swiss do not like any particular person to “get too high.” This, I think, may be a very healthy republican (small r) impulse.

As this latter example suggests, however, direct democracy has an important impact on Switzerland’s low-key, grown-up approach to money and politics. It is not that the Swiss are angels free from corruption; far from it, if we believe some of the country’s most trenchant social critics. It is not that there is no controversy at all over political campaign spending and lobbying and corporate corruption. Direct democracy has problems with money too; they just seem to be smaller than under systems that are more representative and indirect in nature.

Perhaps *The Federalist* was right in observing: “The people can never willfully betray their own interests; but they may possibly be betrayed by the representatives of the people.” This much is certain: It is easier, and less costly, to lobby a few hundred legislators, or a key committee chairman or executive branch official, than to sway the minds and hearts of 7 million people. And – here is the key – when you must lobby millions of people to change policy, the process of lobbying and campaigning and

governing takes on a very different character. There are, as the engineers and the environmental modelers like to say, “feedback effects.”

Summarizing: “Politics as a positive”

Many of the fears our own founders had, in deliberately setting up our democracy as representative and indirect, had to do with a type of ancient direct democracy practiced in Switzerland and Greece, the direct democracy of popular assembly. Popular assemblies were, and are, troubled by a number of flaws. For one thing, there is not enough time at a single meeting to have a meaningful debate, let alone flow of information, for a deliberative consideration of one issue, let alone many. Popular assemblies are also subject to abuse and manipulation, as we all know.

It is worth noting that Swiss direct democracy, while it still includes popular assembly in some cantons and many cantons, seems to have transcended these flaws in a number of ways, as has purely representative democracy in many other countries. The most important, of course, is the press, which offers a stream of extensive, diverse, instantaneous, and ongoing information to voters.

Another is the fact that direct democracy, in terms of initiative and referendum, has proven capable of sustained, intelligent deliberation. I would even go so far as to say that, in Switzerland, popular voting has become deliberative in its nature. Most policies, from taxes to the military to foreign policy to the environment, are mulled over and over and over again over a period of months and years. Sometimes, a proposed change is passed early, but even then, it is usually challenged at least once or twice. Some taxes are defeated, and defeated, and defeated, but most often, the Swiss pick and choose, approving some revenue measures and defeating others. Very seldom, however, are issues settled in a kind of one-shot, winner-take-all manner.

In short, the process of popular legislating looks very much like the process of elite legislating envisioned by the founders, with the notable difference that this process is even harder to corrupt, and develops the popular mind to a greater extent, as the founders, to some extent, foresaw.

In short, the most important impact of direct democracy in Switzerland, in my observation, has been its influence over time. More than any single factor, direct democracy has led the Swiss people to be among the most sophisticated, well-informed, “developed” people in the world. If I had to appear in court, as a defendant or a plaintiff, I think I would rather appear before a jury of Swiss than a jury of any other nationality. If I had to settle a political policy debate, I would rather trust it to resolution before a direct democracy, especially over a period of years, than to any other.

An arresting fact that summarizes direct democracy in Switzerland comes from a survey taken by an American sociologist, Carol Schmid. Schmid asked people an open-ended question about their reasons for feeling pride; if indeed they said they felt any (most did), in being Swiss. A certain number listed the country’s beautiful scenery, or its economic success, as being the chief factors. A few, quite frankly, weren’t proud. But the vast majority was. And of those, the number one reason for this, listed by more than 70 percent of Swiss, was a pride in and satisfaction with the country’s political system.

“Politics,” in short, is not a dirty word, and, indeed, remains a relatively positive one. To those of us who believe, with Aristotle, that politics is the highest art, this is an exhilarating possibility to contemplate. “Of course Swiss are satisfied with our system,” as a town worker shoveling snow in Schwyz told me. “The system is us.”

Now, I believe people feel that way to some extent in all the democracies. There is, however, comparatively less alienation, and a much closer association between people and elites, however, between the rulers and the ruled, under direct democracy, than there is under indirect democracy.

This is natural. Under indirect democracy, the system works for us, reports to us, cites us as favoring its policies, and incessantly directs appeals at us, “the people.” In direct democracy – note the exact words of that snow shoveler – “the system *is* us.” In this identity, as opposed to a close proximity, there is an important difference in degree and culture.

(It is even a little more complicated, given that Switzerland is not a pure direct democracy, i.e., it has organs of representation at all levels. But in comparative terms, more questions are referred more often, to the people, than in other democracies, which are typically less direct by degree.)

It’s only fair, and prudent, to mention some of the elements of Swiss democracy that are not so attractive

Some negatives and some costs

“The problem with socialism,” as I believe George Bernard Shaw complained, “is that it takes up too many evenings.” This is one problem with direct democracy and its concomitant, citizen’s government. Truly, it takes up a lot of evenings.

I do not say this lightly, or as a subtle means of praising direct democracy. This level of citizenship is a burden on time and on the mind. It is becoming still more difficult to manage in an age when the pressures on women, men, and families seem to be high and rising.

Even the time that must be devoted to voting, and making a considered vote, is a burden Swiss sometimes complain of. Of course, as a matter of turnout per election, Swiss voting rates are not much different than in the U.S. or most of Europe: 30 to 35 percent in local and quiet elections, up to 70 percent in highly controversial ones. But notice that in representative democracy, there may be an election only once every year or two. In Switzerland, between representative elections and cantonal, federal, and local ballot questions, there are often several votes per year, and for many of them, the voters must make a direct choice on an important question of policy. Accordingly, the burden on the Swiss voter, and the level of Swiss voter turnout, considered in terms of the number of trips to the polls and the responsibility of decision, are both actually rather high.

“Time” is a disadvantage not only in terms of personal commitment to voting and to volunteer activities. The process by which the society can make or change policy is, by and large, slow.

Here, by the way, is a negative that might indeed have its positive aspects. In classical thought about democracy, representatives and aristocrats were thought to be necessary in

order to keep the caprices of popular impulse in check. There are certainly reasons to think this from antiquity. In Switzerland, however, to make a broad but largely valid generalization, it has more often been the case that the people act as a check on the impulse of the assembly, than the other way around.

This, if we judge from the debates in the 19th Century, was largely an unanticipated certainly an unintended consequence. But, in an age when they have acquired such a bad name, it's nice to see that unintended consequences can be good.

Some other drawbacks, limitations and costs:

- Direct democracy will probably produce weaker leaders and a less bold, creative, courageous political class. We have already seen this complaint raised in some U.S. states, such as California, where initiative and referendum are common. It is a valid complaint.

- I happen to prefer a system where the team is stronger and the superstars weaker, but there are times when this is a great drawback. This is particularly so for the United States, a global power with global responsibilities and global enemies. Of course, it may be very possible to combine direct democracy with the institution of a strong foreign policy president or Congress. But limiting the people's sovereignty to certain areas will create certain new problems in and of itself. And even if it is accomplished, we will still probably be left with a much weaker leadership class as a whole.

- Direct democracy will weaken the discipline of the two-party system. It has done so in Switzerland, where seven major parties compete and the debate is more fluid, complex, and nuanced. When I picture the endless drone of our television talk show and oped pages, with their left right left right left right thumping, I almost pine for a little more ongoing, sustained role for Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, Ralph Nader, or Jesse Ventura. But note that under a system of direct democracy, people like this might well be ongoing parliamentary players.

There is a lot I don't like about the party system and the current configuration of American politics, but the party system here has deep roots and serves important functions. Those of us who think there should be an expansion of direct democracy cannot ignore this consideration in advocating reforms.

You won't like the results.

I am pained, and almost angry, when approached by my friends of the left or right, who want to know if direct democracy in Switzerland has produced lower or higher tax rates, a more or less stringent environmental policy, and so on. My honest answer to most of them is, "yes." That is to say, you will get a mish-mash. It is not a reform that will lead to predictable policy victories for you. And this, by the way, is a real problem for those advocating direct democracy as a political reform: It cannot gain, if it is honestly advocated, a strong partisan following, from either the right, the left, or even the extreme center.

In fact, judging from Switzerland, I can promise that anyone who works to produce direct democracy, because what they think are the "right ideas" will win, is going to be disappointed. Sometimes what you think is right will win, but that is true under representative democracy. And sometimes you will lose – but then, unlike under

representative democracy, you won't be able to complain as easily that the results were thwarted.

Much more swiftly and un sentimentally, direct democracy brings political agitators and issue nerds like ourselves to have to confront some unpleasant thoughts. You come face to face with the fact that some of your ideas – the ideas themselves, not just your “communication” of them, or the thwarting of them by special interests, but your ideas – may be wrong. It is either that, or the people are wrong, and if that is repeatedly the case, what is the logic of any form of democracy?

Test tubes are small

I'd like to close these observations by making a little bit of a case for my exercise itself – with a defense of the very idea of studying Switzerland.

Yes, Switzerland has only 7.5 million people, and yes it has more mountains than some countries, and yes it is only about half the size of Maine. Still, the United States had less than 10 million people at its founding. Does this mean representative democracy will not work for us today? What are we to say to nations like India, Russia, Indonesia, and China? Indeed, the Greek city-states of antiquity were much smaller, much more ethnically and linguistically homogenous, and more powerful and “developed,” compared to other nations of their time, than Switzerland is today. Perhaps we should conclude that direct democracy only works in larger, somewhat less developed states, which are distinctly non-homogenous. And yes, Switzerland has federalism and a relatively weak federal state. But then again, so does Yugoslavia.

I can't say that direct democracy accounts for all or necessarily most of Switzerland's present states. But I would say, it seems to explain many of those accidents. It is true that many factors in Switzerland make it especially amenable, today, to direct democracy. But it is also true that those factors were not as strong before direct democracy was instituted. It follows that as much as Switzerland is “capable” of such institutions, it is more the case that such institutions have made Switzerland capable.

A test tube is small, but if you mix chemicals in it you can learn a lot about how they will react if mixed in a huge vat. A nuclear reactor is small compared to the sun; but it demonstrates some of the same atomic dynamics. Apples are not oranges, but they are both fruit; and no two apples are identical, but we may still study them to learn which differences are merely circumstantial, and which similarities reveal the underlying principles of apleness.

Social science can never reach the exactitude of a test tube, but countries and their differing institutions are the only test tubes we have. To those who would cavil about Switzerland's uniqueness, I would turn the question around, and ask, what makes Switzerland so unique? In my observation, in a world where all countries have people, ethnic diversity, rich, poor, and other “chemical inputs,” in Switzerland, these inputs are combined with one added element that is truly unique: Direct democracy. “Like principles,” as Lincoln put it, “imply like results.”

In that case, we may conclude that Switzerland is a valid experiment for comparison; these other countries, with many similarities and many differences on other points, are the control group; and direct democracy in Switzerland, the independent variable.

We may join Tocqueville, Benjamin Franklin, and others in believing that Switzerland, in the words of Bryce in the 1920s, has “of all the democracies, the highest claim to be studied,” because it has taken the democratic idea “to its furthest extent.”

We may even believe, as I believe many of the participants in this exercise do, that it is this small case that will serve as a model -- with due adaptation to circumstance, to be sure -- for many other countries. Even though there is no “end of history,” it may be, as Victor Hugo cryptically observed, that “Switzerland will have the last word.”

Gregory Fossedal chairs the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution in Washington, DC, online at www.adti.net. He is the author of several books about the growth and perfection of democracy, including *The Democratic Imperative* and the forthcoming *Direct Democracy in Switzerland*.