



**Common Ground**

# **Country Report: Switzerland**

The Significance of Citizen Participation in Politics and Society

*By Gabriel Pelloquin*

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# 1. The Special Case of Switzerland

Switzerland is a special case in terms of participation compared to other European countries. The multicultural and multilingual country roots in its self-image as a *nation of will*: Unlike cultural or state nations, political rights as well as the autonomy of the cantons and communes form the essential core of the nation. Democracy and its corresponding comprehensive opportunities for political and social participation are a constitutive element of the Swiss identity. The significance of participation as a concept of political freedom is therefore important for the Swiss self-perception.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, by uniting the linguistically and culturally different parts of the country as a nation to establish and preserve this freedom, and secondly by a distinction from neighbouring European countries (with which there are often greater regional similarities, both linguistically and culturally, than with other parts of the country). Citizens' participation in the political process is not something that is provided by institutions of power as an addition to the existing representative system, but rather a central component of Switzerland's political constitution. In the *Varieties of Democracy Index* (V-Dem), Switzerland unsurprisingly achieves a high score of 0.8 out of 1 in the "Participatory Democracy Index" (compared to 0.6 in France and 0.61 in Germany). In this respect the participation criteria are indicative:

"The participatory principle of democracy emphasizes active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral. It is motivated by uneasiness about a bedrock practice of electoral democracy: delegating authority to representatives. Thus, direct rule by citizens is preferred, wherever practicable."<sup>2</sup>

As will be shown below, this fundamental scepticism towards authority is reflected in the Swiss understanding of the state.

## 2. Institutionalized Democratic Structures

In Switzerland's semi-direct democracy, there is a wide range of possibilities for institutionalized participation that enable citizens to play a role in political processes. In addition to the periodic elections at various levels to appoint representatives to legislative bodies (e.g. National Council and Council of States, cantonal and municipal parliaments), the votes on popular initiatives as well as optional and mandatory referendums, which are held up to four times a year, are particularly important in the context of participation. In addition, consultation procedures are an important part of the legislative process.

In principle, there is a very high level of direct participation, and citizens can get involved in the legislative process at various levels. It is interesting to note that Switzerland has one of the lowest voter turnouts in the world: Since 1979, participation in national elections has consistently been below 50 percent, with 46.6 percent last October 2023. This low turnout may not be indicative of a lively culture of participation, but can be explained, at least in part, by the fact that personal preferences can be fed into the political system via direct democratic instruments. However, in votes (regarding specific issues, as opposed to the elections of representatives), voter turnout also tends to be low on average; and age, education and individual political interest are discriminating factors in both elections and votes (older, well-educated and politically interested people tend to participate more).

The following section takes a look at four pillars of Switzerland's democratic and participatory system: The militia system (2.1), federalism and the associated subsidiarity (2.2), con-

<sup>1</sup> On this, as well as the rest of the text, see Marc Bühlmann, *Zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit – Beteiligungskultur in der Schweiz*. In: Marion Stock, Jeannette Behringer (eds.), *Teilhabe und Mitgestalten – Beteiligungskulturen in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz* [= Beiträge zur Demokratieentwicklung von unten Nr. 26] (Bonn 2014). p. 59–79.

<sup>2</sup> [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/), Switzerland, V-Dem Indices: Participatory Democracy Index. (1.11.23)

cordance as a guiding political principle (2.3) and consultation procedures (2.4).

## **2.1 The militia system**

The understanding of the state described at the beginning, in which the (voting) people are the sovereign, can be seen in the militia system, which stipulates that public offices are held by citizens on an honorary basis alongside their main professional activities. Although Switzerland has also experienced an increasing professionalisation of politics, even the national parliament is – at least still *de iure* – a militia parliament; most members of the National Council and Council of States have other professions in addition to their political activities. The national parliament is therefore a mix of part-time and professional parliament.

The fact that voluntary work is a prerequisite, particularly at the municipal level, and that offices are held on a part-time basis means that the distance between officeholders and the public is kept to a minimum. However, while elected representatives in the national parliament receive a relatively high salary including all allowances, this is not necessarily the case at the municipal level and commitment is often only financially rewarded to a limited extent. This creates a potential selection bias by reserving the exercise of an honorary office for more affluent people. As a result of this lack of financial compensation, as well as other participatory hurdles, many municipalities struggle to fill positions.

## **2.2 Federalism and subsidiarity**

However, due to the federal system, it is precisely the municipalities and cantons that are the key players. The cantons have fully developed state structures and therefore their own political institutions. The municipalities also have autonomy, the form of which is determined by cantonal law. This autonomy is underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity, which states that a task is only delegated to a higher level if it exceeds the capacity and competence of the lower authority. This sovereignty is particularly evident in the fact that naturalization procedures are unique in Europe in that they are carried out at the level of the municipalities, which decide who they admit to their citizenship.

This local autonomy means that Switzerland has a patchwork of different political structures. In some cantons, for example, financial referenda may be held that require a mandatory or optional vote on government spending. While some municipalities have an elected parliament, many others hold municipal assemblies: Meetings of the voting population and thus direct democratic political bodies. Such gatherings not only take place in municipalities and some towns but are still prominent today under the name “Landsgemeinde” in the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden (approx. 16,400 inhabitants) and Glarus (approx. 40,000 inhabitants).

## **2.3 Concordance as a guiding principle**

Another important pillar of the Swiss political system is what is known as the principle of concordance. This provides for decisions to be made by involving the largest possible number of stakeholders (parties, associations, minorities) in the political process. This concordance is the result of strong minority protection in Switzerland, recognizable by the right of referendum or the majority of the cantons: A national vote on the constitution or certain important international treaties requires a double majority, i. e. in addition to the popular majority, the majority of the cantons must also approve a proposal (since 1866, ten initiatives and referendums have failed due to the majority of the cantons, most recently the Responsible Business Initiative in 2020).

However, the decisive factor for concordance is above all the way of governing: in parlia-

ments there is no division into coalition government factions and an opposition; instead, changing majorities are formed from issue to issue. The hallmark of consociational democracy is therefore the constant search for good compromises. The Federal Council, the highest, seven-member executive body, also acts as a collegial authority and is composed according to a certain – repeatedly contested – party proportionality in line with parliament’s composition.

## 2.4 Consultations

Another example of participation in Switzerland’s political structures is the aforementioned consultation procedures. They are an important phase in the legislative process that regulates the involvement of cities and cantons, political parties and interested parties (in particular associations) in preparing constitutional amendments, certain legislative provisions, important international treaties and other similar projects of major importance. The Federal Council invites them to comment, whereby every individual is also free to comment on a proposal (although predominantly organized interests make themselves heard).<sup>3</sup> Thus, consultation processes can lead to certain projects being watered down on the one hand, as compromises have to be found while benefiting from broad support on the other. Not least given the possibility of an optional referendum against new legislative proposals, consultations are important and serve to make a bill “referendum-proof”.

**3** An overview of current and completed consultations, including submitted comments, can be found on the Federal Council’s website: <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/de/consultation-procedures> (15.11.2023)

## 3. Citizenship and Civil Rights

Switzerland proves to be conservative when it comes to expanding democratic participation rights, which is particularly evident in the late introduction of women’s suffrage and the continued exclusion of migrants. It was not until 1971 that Swiss women were granted the right to vote at the national level. In the canton of Appenzel Innerrhoden – one of the two cantons that still have the “Landsgemeinde” – it was only enforced by a court ruling in 1990. While voters enjoy many political rights, these citizenship rights – which, as explained above, are granted by the Swiss municipalities – are only given very restrictively, usually only after 10 years of residence. This results in a bottleneck problem that excludes a considerable proportion of the resident population from the political process: Over a quarter of adults living in Switzerland, often for many years, do not have the participation rights associated with citizenship, with a few cantonal and communal exceptions, and are largely excluded from the political process.

## 4. Political Education

In Switzerland, there is a high level of awareness of civil rights and pride in the country’s special democratic status. However, the close link between Swiss identity and what is widely perceived as the best democracy in the world and its opportunities for participation means that there is little coherent, critical discourse on these issues. Nowhere is this finding more evident than in the area of political education, for which no clearly defined legal mandate and no state bodies exist (with the possible exception of school curricula, which are, however, a matter for the cantons). Citizens are considered sovereign, which is reflected in the political instruments: The people, generally sceptical of authority and structural change, do not need to be educated by the state, but conversely rather determine the fate of the state. In contrast

to other countries, the state in Switzerland is to be understood more as a administrative machine; it is an executive organ, but not an initiating one. This also has to do with the perception of democracy as a militia system. The general view is that political education takes place through direct democratic participation in political events. In this sense, promoting democracy is not necessary, as decisions are the result of the natural will of the people.

## 5. Does Switzerland Need New Deliberative Processes?

As shown, the Swiss population enjoys a high level of political participation. Another, more complicated question is that of its deliberative quality. In Switzerland, the concept of deliberation is fundamentally more diffuse and more difficult to situate in comparison to other European countries, which can also be understood as a consequence of the large number of political and social participation opportunities. The discourse around new deliberative and specifically lot-based procedures has been increasingly emerging – with some delay to the surrounding countries – since last year but is still highly fragmented. This emerging deliberative potential faces structural and cultural hurdles, which are primarily related to the Swiss democratic self-image described above.

### 5.1 A discomfort in Swiss democracy?

The discourse on the introduction of new deliberative formats is being led primarily by academics and some players from civil society, who, despite all the existing opportunities for participation in Switzerland, criticize the lack of adaptation of democracy to the challenges of the present day. According to the “Demokratiemonitor” (Democracy Monitor) by Pro Futuris, the population is clearly in favour of the democratic co-determination rights of direct democracy. Nevertheless, at 46%, slightly less than half of those surveyed do not believe that the current system will be able to master the major challenges of the future.<sup>4</sup> Other problem analyses that have been put forward point to an increasing polarization of political discourse, major lobbying influence and the associated lack of transparency in political decisions, a lack of information among the population and problems with the attention economy in public debates. Popular initiatives and referendums are also sometimes discussed critically, as they are largely launched by associations and parties and are often used as an agenda-setting tool (by putting proposals with no chance of success to the ballot box to introduce an issue into the political discourse). A further analysis of Switzerland’s democratic malaise is presented in the working paper “Baustelle Demokratie” (Building Site Democracy) by seven think tanks, which points out, among other things, the aforementioned exclusion of residents without citizenship.<sup>5</sup> These findings lead to the conclusion that Swiss democracy needs to be developed further, with more participation and often specifically organised, lot-based deliberation being called for to eliminate the mentioned deficits.

### 5.2 Possible combinations of direct and deliberative democracy

The integration and productive coupling of such formats with Switzerland’s existing democratic instruments is conceptually conceivable in all phases of the political process. In the following, various possibilities for integrating deliberative formats such as citizens’ assemblies into Switzerland’s existing political processes are listed.<sup>6</sup> These examples are also conceivable in a modified form for the cantonal and municipal levels.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.demokratie2050.ch/demokratiemonitor> (1.11.2023)

<sup>5</sup> [https://craft.stiftung-mercator.ch/files/Dokumente/Publikationen/Baustelle\\_Demokratie\\_Arbeitspapier-2023.pdf](https://craft.stiftung-mercator.ch/files/Dokumente/Publikationen/Baustelle_Demokratie_Arbeitspapier-2023.pdf) (15.11.2023)

<sup>6</sup> The following list is based on Nenad Stojanović, *Citizens’ assemblies and direct democracy*. In: Min Reuchamps, Julien Vrydagh, Yanina Welp: *De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens’ Assemblies* (Berlin/Boston 2023). p. 183–195.

- In **consultation processes**. While individuals are free to comment on consultations, they are primarily used by associations, cantons and municipalities. Especially in the case of controversial topics, citizens could be involved by being drawn by lot to enrich a draft law with perspectives and arguments before it is submitted to parliament.
- Convening a so called deliberative mini-public could also be interesting for **initiative committees** to work out an initiative's exact wording – similar to a consultation procedure – or also to legitimize it.
- Deliberative formats could also be incorporated into **parliamentary processes**, for example, to review the “referendum safety” of a finished draft law (in contrast to the consultation process, it would be the parliament that convenes a citizens' assembly, not the government).
- For **counter-proposals to popular initiatives**. It is rather rare for parliament not to submit a counter-proposal to a popular initiative (as they are often launched by minority groups). Citizens drawn by lot could weigh up the initiative and the counter-proposal and provide both parliament and the initiative committee with important information.
- Another conceivable next step would be to address the electorate directly through a **Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) in a referendum**. In the case of a mandatory or optional referendum, or a popular initiative that was not withdrawn after a parliamentary counter-proposal (or for which there was no counter-proposal), a popular vote is held. Prior to this vote, the arguments and voting recommendations of randomly selected citizens could be sent to the population together with the usual voting brochures<sup>7</sup>.
- Deliberative mini-publics could also play a role **after a successful vote**, as adopted laws must be implemented by the government and administration. This also applies in particular to constitutional amendments, as new laws have to be created in parliament for this purpose.

The direct democratic options of the Swiss electorate also raise different questions on the establishment and political integration of deliberative citizens' assemblies than in other countries. On the one hand, recommendations could be submitted directly to the people by a citizens' assembly developing a specific voting proposal or deriving it from a catalogue of recommendations. On the other hand, the convening of such an instrument could also be decided by the electorate. Both scenarios are interesting in that they shed new light on the much-discussed problem of the institutionalization of citizens' assemblies and the implementation of their recommendations and would thus at least partially resolve the clash of opposing logics – cooperative deliberation on the one hand, power politics on the other.

### 5.3 Why change the best of all democracies?

However, the difficult discussions on this topic show that such proposals are by no means a foregone conclusion. The scepticism in large parts of the population towards political and social innovations described above is also – or especially – evident in the introduction of organised lot-based, deliberative processes. The view that democracy needs to be further developed and thus changed is by no means shared by all sections of the population, as can be seen from the majorities in recent elections. In such circles, people tend to think in terms of political rights rather than the potential benefits of introducing deliberative formats: Citizens already have extensive political powers in Switzerland, so why would such novel processes be

<sup>7</sup> These voting booklets are published by the public administrations – the communes, the cantons and the federal government – for upcoming referendums. They contain information on the voting topics that is as balanced, neutral, factual and comprehensive as possible. All brochures for national votes since 1978 can be viewed here: <https://www.bk.admin.ch/bk/de/home/dokumentation/abstimmungsbuechlein.html> (15.11.2023)

needed? As explained at the beginning, delegating one's voice and authority is generally met with mistrust. Why transfer your own political influence not only to another chosen person but to a randomly selected one? This raises the challenge of working out the (potentially) complementary character of new participatory-deliberative processes to established political structures. It is not uncommon for debates to focus on a *juxtaposition* between deliberation and direct and representative democracy.

The fact that proponents of deliberative innovations cannot easily achieve their goals is shown by a parliamentary initiative by the Green parliamentary group "Als Antwort auf die Klimakrise die Demokratie erweitern. Einen durchs Los bestimmten Klimarat schaffen" (Expanding democracy in response to the climate crisis. Creating a climate assembly determined by lot), which was submitted to the National Council in the fall of 2020.<sup>8</sup> The initiative envisaged far-reaching powers for the lot-based, deliberative body, comparable to a parliamentary commission. It stood no chance in parliament and was rejected with 136 votes against, 33 in favour and 19 abstentions.

The rejection of new deliberative political formats became just as visible during the 2021 Citizens' Assembly on Food Policy. A parliamentary motion by the Swiss People's Party even spoke of an undesirable "shadow parliament", coupled with a reference to Switzerland's special democratic traditions: Neighbouring countries may need such formats, but not the Swiss Confederation with its extensive participatory customs, which is why no public funds should be spent on such processes.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. Outlook – a Deliberative Wave in Switzerland?

Despite the headwind, discussions about lot-based, deliberative formats have gained momentum. A growing number of players are working on the topic and carrying out pilot projects. Following the Citizens' Assembly on Food Policy, the "Zukunftsrat U24" (Future Council U24) organised by Pro Futuris on the topic of mental health was the second process to be carried out at national level.<sup>10</sup> The Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau is planning another national citizens' assembly for 2024/25 (with the author's involvement. Associations and movements such as Citizens' Democracy and AG!SSONS campaign for the instrument. Recently, there was an event at the National Museum in Zurich at which a group called for a Future Council (not to be confused with the Pro Futuris project) as a permanent third chamber of parliament.<sup>11</sup> However, these are mostly small discursive and geographical islands and isolated initiatives; for all their dynamism, there has so far been little consolidation and a lack of a unified discourse.

Not least the regional autonomy sometimes means that there are few national structures in certain subject areas, and there are currently no signs of a broad public debate. The question of who demands and implements such formats and to what extent the polarisation between progressive and conservative camps is strengthened or overcome as a result will also be decisive.

Then again, this strong local autonomy means that there are many opportunities to carry out processes locally. Much of this comes from the cities and cantons, as shown, for example, by the Participation Coordination Office in Zurich with its Citizens' Panels or the local CIR trials by the Demoscan association. Particularly in municipalities whose municipal assemblies suffer from a lack of participation, testing new deliberative and, above all, lot-based mobilization and participation processes could be met with increasing interest.

<sup>8</sup> The text of the initiative, the report of the National Council's responsible state policy committee, the chronology of the debate and the vote can be viewed here: <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20200467> (15.11.2023)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20227417> (15.11.2023)

<sup>10</sup> <https://zukunftsrat.ch/> (15.11.2023)

<sup>11</sup> However, the event can be seen as evidence of the lack of uniformity in the discourse on the topic: This "Future Council", a classic citizens' assembly format, was staged as a new idea, notwithstanding all the projects, discussions and initiatives that had already been carried out. <https://www.landesmuseum.ch/de/veranstaltung/mit-einem-zukunftsrat-gegen-die-klimakrise-warum-die-schweiz-eine-dritte-parlamentskammer-braucht-26376> (15.11.2023)



## 7. Author

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