

## Federal System and Direct Democracy in Switzerland

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### **Abstract:**

*The main aim of this work is to present and analyze the structure and the way of operating of the Swiss instruments of direct democracy, as well as its significance for the country's development. The Swiss example is the best case of functioning democracy in the world. Throughout the centuries, the Swiss political system has evolved into a mature and efficient democracy. The process of its improvement is still going on. Today, the political system of Switzerland can be described as parliamentary-cantonal. In 1848, the country adopted the Federal Constitution and a system based on referenda, while local issues, such as taxes, judiciary, schooling, police, and welfare were left to the cantons. In 1874, the document was amended and the optional referendum was introduced. In 1891, another amendment cemented the unique system by rooting it strongly in direct democracy. The current constitution of Switzerland was adopted by the majority of voters through a referendum that took place in 1999.*

### **Keywords:**

*Switzerland; Swiss political system; direct democracy; Swiss constitution; federal system*

## **I. Introduction**

The most important innovation of the 1848 constitution – which was later amended in 1874, 1891, and 1999 – was that it introduced a system equipped with some elements of direct democracy. It granted citizens a number of rights and liberties, such as the freedom of speech, religion, and the free choice of place of residence. This new political order was institutionalized even further according to the aspiration of the liberal-democratic cantons. The possibility to amend the constitution through a special referendum or popular initiative was introduced at the outset. The document should be considered as a declaration of the will of its creators. As time has shown, this democratic system, based on instruments of direct state governance and strong federal tendencies, was not just an imaginary goal – it has become a reality.

## **II. Research Methods**

A significant portion of this work is comprised of the analysis of various legal solutions that regulate the most important aspects of the political system in Switzerland. In order to carry out the research, several methodological tools were applied:

1. System analysis in which all phenomena concerning the decision-making process are considered as a part of a system, i.e., “an internally structured combination of elements.” The aim of this method was to provide a general presentation of the rules that guide the functioning of the decision-making process in analyzed countries.
2. Institutional and legal analysis which focused on the legal acts of the analyzed institutions and procedures. It is an indispensable tool for researching particular institutions and agencies, as well as the whole political system.

3. Historical analysis which proved necessary to discuss the evolution of the solutions adopted in the analyzed country. It allowed to show the origins of the phenomena that take place in the decision-making processes and, to some extent, their causal connections.

While working on this study, I have relied on specialist literature that was selected according to the problems discussed in the article. Apart from generally available sources, I have used unpublished materials, which were often unavailable up to this point, and statistical data.

Additionally to reliable research methods, such as the analysis of literature and statistical data, I have conducted and verified numerous interviews. As a result, I was able to resolve certain inaccuracies and to answer unique questions connected to the specific aspects of various historical, political and economic situations. My interlocutors were mainly representatives of the Swiss political systems. This allowed me to verify a number of previously hypothetically stated factors that determine the political system in both countries.

### **III. Discussion**

#### **3. 1 The Constitution as a Guarantor of the Federal System**

The beginning of Switzerland date back to 1291. The centuries long evolution of its statehood was facilitating by the systematic addition of new cantons joining the confederation. The basis for the 1291 pact were economic and security considerations. While the economic factor included mainly tariffs, the military alliance's goal was to protect the country from invasions. In the fifteenth century, the Habsburgs attempted to incorporate Switzerland do their empire, however, after the lost Battle of Dornach in 1499, the Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian I declared it impossible to subdue the cantons, which, at that time, were supported by France. As a result of the peace treaty signed in Basel, Switzerland was granted an immunity. This facilitated the development of the confederation and induced additional cantons to separate themselves from Italy and France and join Switzerland. After the Thirty Years War, following the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, Switzerland gained yet another guarantee of its independence and sovereignty. In 1788, Napoleon took control of the majority of the cantons and renamed them as the Helvetic Republic. For a number of years Switzerland was allied with France, but, after the Battle of Leipzig of 1813, it declared itself neutral, which was further confirmed during the Congress of Vienna in 1815. In 1847, a civil war broke out between the catholic and protestant cantons, which resulted in the Federal Constitution of 1848. Thus, Switzerland became a country based on direct democracy with a vast number of competencies relegated to the cantons and local authorities.

Switzerland, officially known as the Swiss Confederation (Confoederatio Helvetica – CH), is a federal state with three administrative levels: the federation, the cantons, and the communes. The cantons have a significant autonomy; each of them has its own constitution, laws, parliament, and judiciary. Although they are sovereign and function as states, they cannot leave the confederation.

Despite the fact that the Swiss federation uses the term “confederation” as its official name, its political system is direct democracy in which the supreme power is exercised by the people. The universal suffrage, both active and passive, was introduced in 1848 for men and in 1971 for women (though only on the cantonal level). The current constitution of the Confederation was enacted on January 1, 2000. The previous one was introduced on May 29, 1874, and was a result of a thorough revision of the constitution of September 12, 1848. The

essential part of the current constitution is Article 3, which defines the state's federal character: The Cantons are sovereign except to the extent that their sovereignty is limited by the Federal Constitution. They exercise all rights that are not vested in the Confederation.

The article provides the foundation of Switzerland's political system and emphasizes the important role of the principle of subsidiarity. The constitution, comprised of a preamble and six titles, says that all agencies of the state act within the limits of the law and in good faith, whereas their competencies are split between the federal and cantonal authorities. The federal authorities carry out only those tasks that are directly mentioned in the constitution, and any jurisdiction disputes are solved through negotiations and mediation. Although the federal and cantonal levels transcend each other, each canton has its own agencies, constitution, and laws. It is quite often that the realization of the duties defined by the federal law is relegated to the cantons.

The procedure of amending the constitution has two stages:

1. The initiative of 100,000 citizens eligible to vote,
2. The referendum.

If the citizens manage to get their initiative approved in the referendum by the majority of the voters, it still has to be approved by one of the parliamentary chambers, namely the National Council or the Council of the States. In case the initiative is approved by the former, it means the beginning of the parliamentary procedure; otherwise, a new referendum is required. If the people vote for the amendments to the constitution, it results in the shortening of the parliament's term of office and electing new representatives to both chambers.

It should also be added that the referendum on amending the constitution has a two-fold nature when it comes to counting the votes. The total of the votes is counted separately from the votes cast in the cantons. In order for a proposed amendment to be adopted, it must be approved by the majority of the general votes and by the majority of the cantons. The referendum regarding an amendment to the constitution is characterized by its "singularity," meaning that society's voice in this matter is final.

The essential value of the Swiss constitution is that it does not question the legal identity of the cantons. The constitution does not turn against patriotism or attachment to the regional culture and identity. On the contrary, it integrates patriotism into the federal system, where it is a great force in service of a given canton and the Confederation.

### **3.2 The Swiss Federalism**

As it has already been mentioned, Switzerland's political system has three essential levels: the federation, cantons, and communes. It functions on the basis of a decentralized federalism that follows the principle of subsidiarity. This means that all decisions are made in a grassroots manner, with the direct participation of citizens. The decisions that cannot be made on the communal level are made by the cantonal authorities. It has become a rule in many areas that the federal government makes law, but it leaves its implementation to the cantons, and they carry out this procedure according to their own regulations. Switzerland's strong federalist tradition expresses itself in the fact that each canton's authorities focus only on their own problems without criticizing other cantons. The cantons cannot be compared to provinces or administrative districts in other democratic countries. This is because they are, in essence, independent, territorial units that resemble – and consider themselves as – separate states (German Staat, French l'Etat). They have all rights characteristic of a state, apart from those that they voluntarily waived to the federation. It should be emphasized, though, that as many

representatives of the cantons have noticed – from 1848 the number of rights of the federation has been growing, while the number of the rights of the cantons has been diminishing. According to the general political tradition of Switzerland, the higher instances of the government should relegate as much political tasks as possible to the lower instances, and the cantons should retain their constitutions, parliaments, governments, as well as financial and tax sovereignty intact. Moreover, the cantons, apart from making and implementing their own laws, are obliged to implement the federal laws.

The basis of the Swiss political culture is the principle of proportionality and consensus that apply to the representation through political parties and to officially used languages. This allows to create a legal environment free of conflicting regulations on all three administrative levels, as well as in regard to local minorities.

The Swiss mentality is characterized by a strong sense of local and political affiliation. Citizens identify themselves first and foremost with their commune and canton.

The system is undoubtedly organizationally complex and costly, but, in practice, it generates an authentic participation of citizens in the political life of the country, giving them satisfaction of making decisions on the matters that directly affect them.

The Swiss Federation consists of 26 cantons with a very diverse social, linguistic, religious, and cultural profiles. Among other tasks, a cantonal government supervises the communes, approves a budget, implements federal laws, appoints crucial cantonal officials, and controls important financial operations. The legislative authority is a cantonal council, i.e., a cantonal parliament comprising of 100 deputies, elected for a term of four years by the canton's citizens in general elections.

A cantonal government usually consists of 5-9 members who head a number of departments. It is obliged to enforce the decisions of the cantonal council, supervise the administration of the canton, provide advice to the communes, organize elections and referenda, and appoint lower cantonal officials.

An analysis of the Swiss political system cannot omit the particular role that the communes play as the foundation of the country. Historically, the communes were the first Swiss political units, and only as the result of acquiring new lands or conquest, the cantons were established. All rural and urban communes have retained their rights up to this day, and their sovereignty is guaranteed by the constitution. There are many structural similarities between the communes in all cantons. A communal assembly comprises of all citizens eligible to vote. Depending on the laws of the canton it belongs to, it either has the direct legislative power or it appoints a body of representatives with such power. An assembly approves the communal budget and supervises its execution, it also enacts taxes, appoints the communal authorities and supervises their activity, and accepts reports on the communal agencies' activity.

A communal assembly's sessions are called by its executive agency. The sessions divide into normal and special ones. A normal session takes place on dates pre-established by communal regulations or its executive agency. A special sessions is called whenever it is necessary by the commune's executive agency or by a motion put forward by the majority of citizens eligible to vote. The sessions are headed by the president of the commune. A general assembly, as a direct legislative agency, exists only in several, minor communes. The typical model is the so-called special model of communal organization, existing in the majority of the

communes. It replaces the assembly with a communal parliament, elect by the communal assembly for a term of 2-4 years. The number of its members is set by the assembly, and it is chaired by the communal president. The mode of its sessions is similar to the one of the communal assemblies'. Thus, the majority of assemblies' competencies were transferred the communal parliaments. However, the fundamental matters such as budget, taxes, and appointment of the communal officials, are still decided on by the assemblies.

The executive agency of the commune is the communal council, and its 3-9 members are elected by the assembly. The council is headed by the communal president, who also is the head of the assembly. From a formal point of view, the president has the same competencies as other members of the council. The term of office of the council is concurrent with the term of office of the executive agencies of the canton. The internal structure of the council is similar to the one of the cantonal government. Its members, apart from the president, also head specific departments.

### **3.3 The Party System and the “Magic Formula”**

One of the fundamental characteristics of the Swiss political system is the cooperation of the political parties which boils down to gaining seats and appointing a common cabinet. This is based on a kind of friendly agreement, which means that, although all parties represented in the parliament rule jointly, the cabinets are not coalitional. There is no parliamentary opposition in Switzerland. The process of creating a cabinet follows a so-called magic formula (Ger. Zauberformel): 2/2/2/1 (three parties with the largest number of seats gained provide two members each and the fourth party provides one member).

The magic formula results in the fact that, despite different election results, there are essentially four main parties that have been wielding power since 1959 and that represent 70 percent of society:

- Sozialdemokratische Partei der Schweiz SP (Social Democratic Party of Switzerland),
- Freisinning-Demokratische Partei FDP (Liberal Democratic Party of Switzerland),
- Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei CVP (Christian Democratic People's Party),
- Schweizerische Volkspartei SVP (Swiss People's Party).

Every canton has a different set of parties, and moreover, every party has members with different political views. This stems from the fact that the electoral system does not favor a strong party discipline. Since in Swiss elections people vote directly for individuals, the issue of which political party gains the most votes and the people's trust is of secondary importance. Therefore, candidates are aware that, if they are elected, it is because of their personal traits. Parties often reach agreements to propose a number of candidates that matches the number of seats. In such a situation, cantonal governments consider the candidates as elected and do not organize elections.

If we take a look at other countries, minor members of parliamentary coalitions usually do not play a significant role in the political process. In Switzerland, it is the people themselves who constitute the political opposition to the government – by expressing their will through the instrument of direct democracy called referendum.

### **3.4 Instruments of Direct Democracy**

Due to the constitutional legislation and specific instruments of referendum and popular initiative, the Swiss have become the true sovereign whose voice matters in every important issue: from the communal level to the federal, like amending the constitution etc. This collective

system of governance and considerable influence of interest groups and citizens has no counterpart in other countries.

The idea of citizens' participation in political decision-making through direct democracy is the essential part of Switzerland's past. The democratic instruments in this country are:

- people's assembly,
- popular initiative,
- referendum,
- people's veto.

It is worthy of notice that between 1848 and 2010 the instruments were used 570 times. Even though other countries have systems resembling direct democracy, they cannot be compared due to the Swiss system due to its specific nature and complex grass-roots decision-making.

This leads us the difficult task of defining an efficient democratic system based on the instruments grounded in the principle of subsidiarity. In Switzerland, almost every federal act may be submitted to a referendum, which enables citizens to verify the parliaments decision on the national level and to oblige the legislators to modify a given act. These instruments enable citizens to supervise their representatives and the political elites. The issues submitted to referenda vary from minor ones to really important. This is because the Swiss have a vast freedom to make any political issue the subject of popular initiative. As a result, the rulers are not afraid to take on difficult problems, even if it means that they will not get re-elected. In such system, they simply lack incentives to act in a conformist manner.

### 3.5 Popular's Initiative

The instrument of popular initiative plays a key role in the Swiss model. In general, it allows 100,000 citizens eligible to vote to demand amending the constitution, to propose a new bill, or to repeal an act.

An initiative may concern both particular and general issues. If there is a proposal, it is first discussed in the Federal Council and the Federal Assembly. The two bodies issue a formal statement regarding the proposed changes by making different proposals or expanding the initial one. Next, all initiatives and their counterproposals are submitted to the vote of the people and the cantons in a referendum. If the majority of them votes "yes", then the proposal is accepted.

The Swiss political systems distinguishes two types of an initiative: one to adopt a new constitution and one that aims at amending the currently functioning constitution. The former was introduced in 1848, while the latter – in 1891. Both Articles 138 and 139 of the Constitution – concerning the initiative to adopt a new constitution and the initiative to partially amend the Federal Constitution respectively – state that such proposals may be put forward by 100,000 citizens eligible to vote. The initiative concerning a partial amendment may consist of a general proposal or specific provisions. Is the initiative is at odds with the national and international laws, the parliament may declare it wholly or partially invalid. Otherwise, it draws up amendments, according to the proposed direction of changes, and submits it to the assessment of the people and the cantons. If the parliament does not agree with the initiative, it submits the proposal to the vote of the people who then decide whether it should be processed further. In case of a positive result, the parliament draws up proper amendments. A ready project of constitutional amendments is decided upon by the people and the cantons. The parliament offers advice on whether the initiative should be accepted or rejected. If the latter is the case, the

parliament may make a counterproposal, which is then submitted to the vote of the people and the cantons at the same time as the initial proposal. The voters may accept both proposals or point the one that they would like to be approved in case both of them are accepted. If one of the proposals gets the majority of the people's votes and the other gets the majority of the cantons' votes, both are rejected.

### 3.6 Referendum

Switzerland has two types of referenda: mandatory, also known as constitutional, and optional, also called legislative.

Mandatory referendum was introduced already in 1848, and it is used in case of a necessity to amend the constitution. Since 1977, it is also used to decide on joining international organizations. Article 140 item 2 of the Constitution defines the use of the mandatory referendum:

The following are submitted to a vote of the People:

- a. popular initiatives for a total revision of the Federal Constitution;
- b. popular initiatives for a partial revision of the Federal Constitution in the form of a general proposal that have been rejected by the Federal Assembly;
- c. the question of whether a total revision of the Federal Constitution should be carried out, in the event that there is disagreement between the two Councils.

The people and the cantons express their will on issues such as: revision of the Federal Constitution, accession to organizations for collective security or supranational communities, emergency federal acts that are not based on a provision of the Constitution and whose term of validity exceeds one year (such federal acts must be put to the vote within one year of being passed by the Federal Assembly).

The people are the only decision-maker when it comes to: popular initiatives for a total revision of the Federal Constitution, popular initiatives for a partial revision of the Federal Constitution in the form of a general proposal that have been rejected by the Federal Assembly, and the question of whether a total revision of the Federal Constitution should be carried out, in the event that there is disagreement between the two Councils.

### 3.7 People's Veto

Optional referendum, also called people's veto, was introduced in 1874 and is used to oppose already existing laws. According to Article 141 of the Constitution, it requires 50,000 citizens or at least eight of the cantons to be organized. The issues that are submitted to the vote are: federal acts, emergency federal acts whose term of validity exceeds one year, federal decrees (provided the Constitution or an act so requires), international treaties that are of unlimited duration and may not be terminated, provide for accession to an international organization, contain important legislative provisions or whose implementation requires the enactment of federal legislation. The Constitution also allows to submit to the vote other international agreements. According to Article 142, proposals that are submitted to the vote of the People are accepted if a majority of those who vote approve them.

For instance, in 2000-2010 mandatory and optional referenda were used 45 times. The people and the cantons approved the proposal in 11 of them and rejected in four.

### 3.8 Advantages and Disadvantages of Direct Democracy

The functionality of direct democracy closely related to the widespread and conscious participation of citizens and political actors in the state, cantonal, and communal decision-making.

Firstly, direct democracy makes citizens' participation in political decision-making easier. It allows even entities outside the governmental structures to influence the political process.

Secondly, every political actor is able to put forward its demands efficiently. Even those initiatives and referenda that have no chance of success are organized, because they provide a political input that shapes the public opinion.

Thirdly, direct democracy incentivizes rulers to make compromises and to take into account the public's opinions. It means that politicians, from fear of being a "victim" of a popular initiative, are in constant contact with the rest of society. This is particularly advantageous for minorities by enabling them to successfully submit their own proposals.

Fourthly, in direct democracy, final decisions are widely accepted by all actors in the political, economic, and social scene. A decision made via a referendum is much more likely to be supported by the whole society than one pushed forward by political elites.

Fifthly, direct democracy has two important functions when it comes to decision-making: political communication and political socialization. The former, due to the vast number of political actors engaged in decision-making, facilitates the growth of society's political awareness to a level that cannot even be compared with representative democracies. Another factor at work here is the tendency to make compromises, which creates a net of political and social connections where information is constantly exchanged. Political socialization means that society's participation in direct democracy makes it more conscious of its democratic rights and freedoms, such as respecting the arguments of their political opponents.

The problem of dysfunctionality of certain aspects of direct democracy is complex and multileveled.

Firstly, although it allows a wide participation of citizens in the political life of their country, only a small minority actually takes part in this process. It is a group of citizens who, regardless of the political system, would take the political initiative and engage in decision-making anyway. This minority consists of political elite, the so-called *classe politique*, whose opinions and the majority of society usually respects views. Therefore, general political input in direct democracy is not that much different from in representative-parliamentary democracy.

Secondly, direct democracy makes decision-making slower, which may obstruct the process of finding desired solutions. Because the political process in direct democracy has so many actors (political parties, interest groups, society), it has to make compromises. Moreover, political elites are not keen on including the representatives of society in decision-making, but, to the contrary, they tend to limit the number of referenda out of fear of unprofitable decisions made at the polling stations.

Thirdly, direct democracy undermines the position of the established political actors by enabling the people to bypass certain state agencies in exercising their will. The system empowers

the opposition and, as a result, makes much rarer for political opponents to negotiate, discuss, or compromise on their agendas.

This allows the interest groups to push forward proposals that will be beneficial to them, while bearing no political responsibility for the outcomes. The groups, standing between society and political parties, become a competition for the latter, undermining their power.

Fourthly, the multiplicity and diversity of decisions made in direct democracy causes society to become passive. The voters are unable to properly exchange information about all occurring changes, because as it would generate high costs. Usually, on the day before a referendum, only one-sixth of the Swiss voters are fully informed about the issues they are about to decide on.

Fifthly, direct democracy can exacerbate political conflicts in the country. This is especially possible when a referendum concerns issues of “all-or-nothing” nature. This creates a risk of inflaming political struggles, and sometimes leads to oppressing the minority by the majority.

#### IV. Conclusion

The question whether the federal system of Switzerland has more advantages or disadvantages requires an ideological discussion, because it cannot be directly compared with the political systems of other countries. The Swiss federalism has so many aspects that, depending on a currently adopted point of view, they may seem both positive and negative.

Due to the multicultural character of Switzerland, it would be difficult to achieve its current level of political and social consensus without its particular form of federalism. The system ensures a fair treatment of all ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Since many decisions are made at the lowest political level, citizens are protected from unjust or harmful interferences of the state. Federalism thwarts cultural and ethnic conflicts, and allows the state to adjust its activities to the regional differences. The rare occurrence of any regional tensions or political conflicts are the best evidence of the efficient and fully democratic functioning of the Swiss federal state. Despite the fact that the process of negotiations between the cantons, as well as between the federation and the cantons, is often long and slow – which is incomprehensible to foreign observers – it leads to positive results.

The costs of the Swiss system are certainly one of its main downsides. Each of the cantons has its own government, administration, judiciary etc. – even the universities are funded by the cantons. Although it is not an ideal system, the internal and international situation of the country shows that the Swiss would not replace it with any other – even in the face of globalization and increasing European integration. Switzerland protects its cantons’ competencies and its direct democracy in a consistent manner, and in case of inter-cantonal conflicts, it always looks for peaceful solutions (such as the inter-cantonal agreement called “concordat”).

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