

Switzerland's Democratic System

A conversation with *Hans-Peter Schaub*

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What is democracy? What are its fundamental principles?

This question is not easy to answer because there is not a single definition of democracy. Over the centuries there have been several competing conceptions of what democracy is, and this is still true today. My somewhat simplifying definition goes as follows: democracy is a political system in which those affected by political decisions are the same ones who establish their direction, on an equal and regular basis.

As far as fundamental principles are concerned, we can single out three basic elements that are, in one way or another, fundamental for most conceptions of democracy: “freedom”, “equality” and “control”. It is around these three principles that democracy is organized. “Freedom” refers, for example, to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. The principle of “equality” asserts that every citizen should have an equal chance to influence decision-making (“one man, one vote”) and to access political power. The principle of

“control” refers to several mechanisms of exerting control on those holding political power. One mechanism of control is the checks and balances between the branches of power (legislative, executive and judiciary) and between governing and non-governing parties. Elections and referendums are also control mechanisms, which are exercised by citizens. Free media can also exert control by acting as public watchdogs.

These three principles can be attained in varying degrees. In some respects, they can reinforce each other, but, in others, there can be trade-offs between them. Take, for instance, freedom of speech and control. The more you have of the former, the more you will usually have of the latter. If you are free to express your opinion, this facilitates a critical discussion in society about how well the government is doing its job. There are other situations, however, in which the achieving of one of the principles involves some loss of another. Take, for instance, freedom and equality. Suppose that you want that all parts of society have an equal participation in voting and that you make voting compulsory in order to ensure that. By doing so, you will certainly raise equality, but at the expense of the freedom to abstain from voting. It is therefore difficult to say what is the best, or the most democratic, mixture between freedom, equality and control. I do not believe that there is one single best solution for all democracies and for all times. The challenge for each democracy is to find a balance between these principles that is favourable given its particular situation, its own history, its societal composition, the conflicts it has to tackle.

What do you need to have in place to secure democratic governance?

There are many institutions that help stabilize democratic governance, but no single institution can secure it by itself. One very important feature of democracy is that it is open to change. The system itself, its institutions, can be changed through democratic mechanisms. Change has to be possible, even if there are dangers attached to it —change can lead to antidemocratic developments. So, to secure democratic governance, institutions alone are not enough in the long run; you also need a political culture and responsible ac-

tors —elites and ordinary citizens alike— who respect democratic principles, care for democratic principles and stand up for them when needed.

It is certainly crucial that people have instruments —such as recurrent and universal voting— that enable them to form and express their will. A large part of the population must be able to participate, and participation includes not only voting, but also deliberating before voting. Ideally, every citizen should be able to influence the opinion of others, and not just be influenced by others; all citizens should be able to influence which topics are included in the political agenda. Another important factor in stabilizing democratic rule is a system of checks and balances. A single political actor or institution must not be able to change everything. There should thus be some instruments of control between parliament and the executive and some power-sharing between them. There must also be some power-sharing between the government and the opposition. Those who are not in government must have instruments that allow them to oversee and criticize the government. And on a fundamental level, obviously, a democratic organization of the political sphere is useful only to the extent that the power actually resides in politics. Politics must thus have the primacy when it comes to decisions that bind the whole society; that is, the supreme power must be in the political sphere and not be held by the economy, the military or the church.

How can you tell whether a given democratic system is better than another?

As with the definitions of democracy, political science has produced many different propositions on how the quality of a democratic system can be measured. The most simple measuring system I know about was developed by the political scientist Tatu Vanhanen. His system consists of two indicators. One of them is the ratio of the people who cast their vote in the most recent election to the total population. The other one measures the degree of party competition. It is calculated as the percentage of all votes that were not cast for the strongest party. A single number is then produced by multiplying these two indicators. This, of course, is a very crude measuring system; only few scholars today would seriously say that it provides a valid measure for comparing

a democracy with another.

In the project in which I have been involved, which deals with democracy in the Swiss cantons —provinces—, we maintain that there are different dimensions of democracy that interact together and that are linked in varying ways to the fundamental principles of equality, freedom and control. We distinguish six dimensions of the quality of democracy: a) “liberal constitutionalism”, which has to do with legal rules and barriers regarding individual liberties and the rule of law; b) “horizontal accountability”, which is basically the system of checks and balances between state institutions; c) “electoral accountability”, which captures the degree to which decision-makers can be held accountable by citizens through free, competitive elections; d) “participation”, which mainly comprises the channels of direct democracy, such as popular initiatives or referendums, and measures, for instance, how often popular votes are held and how many signatures you would need to collect in order to initiate a popular vote on a topic; e) “public accountability”, which measures, for example, how many different newspapers there are —we argue that newspapers serve as an arena for public discourse and as watchdogs of government’s actions; and f) “inclusion”, which is about who has the right to vote and to be elected, and how broadly and equally these rights are actually used throughout society.

In contrast to approaches like Vanhanen’s, we do not produce a single number that tells how good or bad a democratic system is. Instead, we follow a multidimensional approach that takes into account these six dimensions in parallel. This approach is more complex but more informative. For instance, there may be a country that is very good at inclusion and very bad at public accountability and another one that is good at accountability and bad at inclusion. Calculating a single number would mask the differences between these two countries; we, in contrast, hold that such cases should be distinguished because the democratic qualities of these countries actually differ. So, we look at democracies through a six-spoke spider web chart, where each spoke represents one of the dimensions already discussed. This chart tells you where a democracy’s strengths and weaknesses are.

We use the measuring scheme that I have just described to make comparisons at the sub-national level, more precisely, to study the similarities

and differences between the twenty-six cantons of Switzerland. At the international level, there are similar measuring schemes for comparing countries, such as the Democracy Barometer.

How does Switzerland compare against other countries?

Most schemes for measuring the quality of a country's democracy classify Switzerland as above average. The strengths of Swiss democracy certainly include the combination of a high political stability and a high dispersion of power. Power is dispersed between many parties both in the parliament and in the government. In the last hundred years, no single party has ever managed to get more than a third of all votes. There is also a high dispersion of power between the two chambers of parliament and between the federal state and the cantons. The cantons have indeed quite a lot of power and autonomy compared to other countries. Other strengths are Switzerland's generally good performance when it comes to individual liberties and the country's direct-democratic instruments, which are stronger than anywhere else on the national level.

As far as weaknesses are concerned, turnout rates are comparatively low in Switzerland. Usually, less than 50% of the people go to vote. That is a downside of direct democracy: in Switzerland, we vote not only once every four years, but usually four times per year on a whole bunch of referendums and initiatives. Many people feel overwhelmed and participate only rarely or never. But what is perhaps more important, turnout rates are not only low, but they are also unequal, more unequal than in other countries. For instance, wealthy people participate much more often than poor people do. Another weakness of Swiss democracy is that a large part of the population is excluded —foreigners, who make up nearly 25% of the population, have to pay taxes and obey the rules, but do not have voting rights. Another weakness is that Switzerland lacks regulations and transparency on the funding of electoral campaigns and of political parties. Nobody knows how much money each party has and from where they get it.

How different is Switzerland's democratic system from that of other countries?

I think there are a few differences that make Switzerland kind of a special case. We have talked about some of them already. Direct democracy is a really important feature of Swiss politics. Indeed, direct democracy has had a strong influence on the whole political system. It is a very strong instrument for the opposition. The government and the parliament always run the risk of not getting a project approved in a referendum. There is always an uncertainty. They can minimize this risk only by building broad coalitions for all important projects. It is not enough to obtain a narrow majority in parliament, the support of the most important political actors is usually needed for the majority to be stable enough to survive a popular vote. In this way, direct democracy has been forcing political parties to collaborate and compromise, and to build oversized coalition governments that include leftist, centrist and rightist parties at the same time. This is a quite special feature of Swiss democracy, which may also have helped to hold the country's heterogeneous society together—we have different languages, faiths, economic sectors. Although there have been lots of political conflicts around these cleavages, a culture of compromise has evolved over time that has helped bridge the most dangerous gaps.

The way the government is organized is also a special feature of Switzerland. It exemplifies the dispersion of power that pervades the whole system. The government consists of seven ministers who are elected by the parliament. One of them is formally the president of the state, but this duty rotates every year. Furthermore, the president has no real power over and above the other ministers. His role is basically restricted to preside over government meetings and to be the representative of Switzerland in official matters. Switzerland is a very republican country. I mean, there are countries that no longer have a king, but their presidents are almost treated as if they were one. The Swiss political system, and political culture, is not like that.

What problems does the Swiss system solve that others do not?

Switzerland has been remarkably successful in holding a fundamentally diverse society together and in creating a high level of political stability. Direct democracy in combination with a cooperative disposition to address problems have certainly contributed to this. They have served to integrate the opposition and channel dissent. If you are not happy with a political decision, you do not need to make a revolution or a war. You can start a popular initiative and thus force society to at least listen to your concerns and wishes. This creates stability and gives a high degree of legitimacy to the political order and the decisions approved. The other side of the coin is that in Switzerland it takes a long time to solve problems or induce reforms. Switzerland's politics is usually not fast because it often takes a lot of time to find solutions that are widely accepted. But once a solution is found, it will usually enjoy a high degree of legitimacy and will last for a while. The course of politics does not change every four years, after each election, as can be the case in other countries.

On the other hand, Switzerland's federal system has certainly contributed to hold the country together as well —less so by integrating the whole population but rather by giving space for heterogeneity. Strong federalism allows for some differences in society. One canton, for instance, can organize its school system differently from other cantons, apply different tax rates and yield a different level of public services. To a certain extent, different parts of the country can choose to live differently.

Is democracy in Switzerland free from threats?

No democracy, nor any other form of government, is free from threats. I think there are some threats that are specific to Switzerland and others that also affect other Western countries. Some specific threats to Switzerland have to do with its system of direct democracy. While it has great potential to integrate society, it also bears the danger of dividing it, for instance, when political actors start to acknowledge only that part of society that voted for them. Direct democracy is very sensitive to populism and demagoguery. This is a risk that also exists in representative democracies, but direct democracy exacerbates it.

Direct democracy can lead one to think that the majority of the people can do whatever they want; that is, if the people decide something, then that something has to be carried out no matter what, thus denying the legitimate roles of parliament or the courts. Such a thinking implies a very high concentration of power by the popular majority, which goes against the premise that dispersion of power is an important feature of a stable democracy. If popular decisions cannot be moderated, then strong social conflicts can easily arise.

Another threat to Swiss democracy arises from the small size of the country. Switzerland depends a lot on its neighbours, the European Union and other countries. It has to cooperate with them, and this limits the freedom of Swiss politics to decide on national issues. Democratic instruments are based on the idea that we, as citizens, have the freedom to decide. More and more, however, we have to accept that this is not the whole truth, that we have to take into account what our foreign partners think and what they are ready to accept. Undoubtedly, interdependence with foreign partners is a challenge that practically all countries face today, but this challenge is greater for small countries like Switzerland.

In a broader sense, the primacy and legitimacy of democratic politics organized around nation states are under pressure due to economic globalization. Nowadays, some parts of the economy are highly international. Money can move across borders and companies can easily invest in other countries. The political sphere, however, has not become that international so far. This means that, to some extent, power has shifted towards the economic sector. Democratic politics cannot, for instance, freely set tax rates and rules because companies may threaten to leave the country. Perhaps we need better international political cooperation and a democratic mechanism that operates at the international level. A visionary solution would be a world parliament. The global economy could then be ruled by global politics. If politics loses its primacy and cannot set guidelines for the economy, then citizens may conclude that democracy is useless and may cease to have confidence in it.

Another threat that is not specific to Switzerland is the individualization and segregation of society. People now enjoy much more freedom than they did a hundred years ago, but that greater freedom also bears the danger of dis-

connection. Ease of mobility, social networking services and other factors can lead to disconnected communities, where people get exposed only to ideas similar to their own and are no longer confronted with different worldviews. Democracy is not only about voting, but also about the debate that takes place before and after voting. Voting without having had a thorough debate that crosses the different parts of society or without thinking about what is at stake for others can be very dangerous for a democratic society.

Finally, the influence of money can also threaten democracy. Democracy builds on the idea that every citizen is equal, but people with money can advance their views more easily than those who do not have it, for instance, by buying newspaper space or television time.