

# Direct democracy, political culture, and the outcome of economic policy: a report on the Swiss experience

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## Abstract

Political culture in Switzerland is, to a large extent, influenced by its direct democracy. Compared to purely representative systems, direct democracy leads to a different type of communication among citizens and also between citizens and representatives. The opportunity of deciding for themselves on political issues provides citizens with incentives to collect more information. Because citizens are better informed, politicians have less leeway to pursue their personal interests. As a consequence, public expenditure and public debt are lower when citizens enjoy direct democratic rights. Citizens also feel more responsible for their community: tax evasion is lower in direct than in representative democratic systems. © 2000 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Direct democracy has a considerable impact on Swiss political culture. Two political decisions illustrate that: on November 29, 1989, Swiss citizens voted on

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an initiative that proposed to abolish the Swiss army. The initiative campaign was accompanied by an intensive and (partly) heated discussion among citizens. Until that time, the Swiss army was supposed to be perceived as a sacred institution not only by politicians, but also by voters. Indeed, the whole Swiss political establishment, all politically relevant parties and interest groups, the federal government and both chambers of the Swiss parliament suggested rejecting this initiative. Only the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions abstained from taking a position. Due to this unified attitude of the political establishment and the traditional support of Swiss citizens for their army, an overwhelming rejection of the initiative was expected. The actual result of the ballot came as a surprise: although the initiative was rejected, accompanied by a relatively high voter turnout of 69.2%, some 35.6% voted for the abolition of the army. This result shook the Swiss self-conception. Soon afterwards, some concessions for opponents of the army, like the introduction of a community service as an alternative to military service, were considered.<sup>1</sup>

Already in 1979, Swiss citizens voted on a possible exit from nuclear energy. The proposed initiative ‘for the preservation of popular rights and the security for the construction and operation of nuclear power plants’ was marginally rejected by the people on February 19, 1979, with a majority of 51.2%.<sup>2</sup> However, this initiative led to public discussion about the risk of nuclear energy that was unprecedented in European countries at that time. In Germany, e.g., such discussion was largely prevented because of the unified support for nuclear power of all German parties, employer organisations and trade unions. Environmental policy in Switzerland is, at least in some respects, still supposed to be exemplary today compared to that of its European neighbours. Obviously, the Swiss political system in this case reacted faster to the needs of its citizens than the systems of neighbouring countries with (pure) representative democracies.<sup>3</sup>

At a first glance, these two cases do not seem to illustrate that citizens’ preferences carry through more easily against the position of the political establishment in direct, than in representative democracy, as, e.g., Pommerehne (1978)

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<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Swiss army received considerable support from Swiss voters, but the relatively strong and unexpected minority vote led to a change in defence policy.

<sup>2</sup> See also Aubert (1984, p. 135).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, it has to be considered that environmental policy in Germany is partly hindered by the European Union (EU) regulation. It remains open, however, to what extent this reason is a facade in order not to have to take certain decisions. See, e.g., the discussion about introduction of three-way catalytic devices for cars in Germany between 1983 and 1985. In other cases, such as the compromise of the EU member countries on the directive of used cars decided on July 22, 1999, Germany wanted a less restrictive legislation than its partners. The Council decided by qualified majority against Germany that the automobile industry would have to dispose of cars delivered to customers from the year 2006 without imposing additional costs on customers.

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