

Swiss referendums: an early warning to Europe?

As the country considers capping its population, the drawbacks of direct democracy are becoming clearer. While these votes can serve as a shock absorber, they also rush radical ideas into the mainstream.

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Just before 8am on an unseasonably warm spring Friday, the one-hour train from Zürich to Bern is standing-room only. A group of skiers chats loudly, jostling with their skis, while sneakerclad government workers sit with laptops open and headphones in. Tourists are milling around the restaurant car.



Anna Müller, a Swiss government worker, is fed up after arguing with a skier trying to wedge their equipment partly on to her seat.

“This is why I will vote yes in June,” she says. “The trains in Switzerland are becoming too crowded.”

The vote she is referring to is a national referendum this summer to cap the Alpine country’s population at 10mn people. It currently stands at 9.1mn. If Switzerland votes yes, it could threaten agreements with the EU such as the Schengen free-movement accord and limit companies’ access to skilled foreign workers.

To outsiders, the proposal seems extreme, even dystopian. But in Switzerland almost any idea, however radical, can be put directly to voters through a so-called popular initiative.

Under the country's system, if 50,000 people sign a petition, they can trigger a public referendum to accept or reject a law passed by parliament. And if 100,000 sign a proposal to change the constitution, that too is put up to the vote. For Müller, the issue is practical: she sees crowded trains and a tighter housing market. She also has a sense that the country is changing faster than it once did.

Switzerland has been held up for decades as proof that direct democracy — which today largely consists of the practice of frequently holding referendums — can absorb social tensions rather than amplify them.

But in recent years, as popular initiatives have been invoked for hot topics such as wealth taxes and immigration caps, the mechanism that once anchored Swiss stability has instead appeared to fan controversy and division.

In a country that has often confronted such tensions earlier than its neighbours, the shift offers a preview of how similar pressures — on issues ranging from population caps to trust in institutions — could play out across other liberal democracies.

The question is whether the country's referendum habit is a shock absorber for populism, addressing contentious debates early, or whether instead it puts Switzerland at the mercy of dangerous or frivolous votes, leaving the electorate ever more dissatisfied.

Hans-Peter Schaub, a Swiss political scientist at the University of Bern, suggests that “maybe it could be an idea for others to look at the Swiss model as an early warning system”, since the country's low bar to referendums provides advance notice of issues that can later occupy centre stage in other nations as well.

Immigration is one such topic, another is mixed feelings about the EU — a subject of Swiss debate long before the UK's 2016 Brexit referendum — as well as the vexatious issue of taxation.

“These forces, you see them earlier in Switzerland because of direct democracy,” Schaub adds. “In other countries they are often silenced.”

While Switzerland traces its direct democracy to the establishment of the modern state in 1848 and, before that, to late medieval cantons, not everyone is content with the system today.

Sergio Ermotti, the Swiss chief executive of UBS, the country's biggest bank, warned in January that it could be “too easy” to trigger a nationwide vote, arguing that the 100,000-signature threshold for constitution-changing initiatives no longer reflected the scale or pace of modern Switzerland.

The thresholds for popular initiatives were last fixed in 1977, when Switzerland's population was two-thirds of its size today.

Today increasingly professionalised campaigns have made those requirements less of an obstacle and the process is expected to become easier still. Last month, the Swiss parliament signalled its intention to allow trials with electronically collected signatures for initiatives and referendums.

The numbers tell the story. Since 1891, Swiss voters have been asked to decide on 229 popular initiatives at the federal level. Just 26 have been accepted — roughly one in 10.

But while initiatives were once relatively rare, averaging fewer than one a year until 1970, their frequency has accelerated. Switzerland has held more than four a year on average this century — increasing the opportunities for political actors to test ideas, find sensitive topics and mobilise support.

“Since medieval times the Swiss have had the right to gather and have a say,” says Fredy Gantner, co-founder of Swiss global private equity firm Partners Group. But though he says the system works well, he concedes: “We are voting on too many things, it is too easy.”

In his corner office overlooking downtown Zug — Switzerland’s wealthiest canton and a magnet for international workers — finance minister Heinz Tännler sounds unusually conflicted.

Tännler is a senior figure in the Swiss People’s Party, whose support for controversial referendums over the past 30 years has aided its rise as a precursor of the rightwing populist parties that have since swept much of Europe.

He is now weighing whether to support the so-called “10mn Switzerland” initiative backed by his own party, ahead of what polls suggest will be a tight vote in June.

The Zug finance minister is frustrated with the initiative itself, which he sees as too rigid, but also with what he sees as a vacuum in Bern. The federal government, he argues, has failed to offer a credible counterproposal to address concerns about population growth — leaving voters with a binary choice.

Without a more “intelligent” and moderate alternative, he warns, many Swiss may end up backing the initiative by default. The result, he suggests, could upset the delicate balance between Swiss workers, businesses and the country’s large expatriate population.

June’s vote has a long backstory. Switzerland, with a relatively high population of foreign workers, found itself dealing with tensions over immigration earlier than its neighbouring countries.

In 1970 citizens cast their vote on an initiative that aimed to limit the share of foreigners to 10 per cent of the population, down from 12 per cent at the time. Had it passed, 350,000 people would have had to pack their bags.

The initiative secured about 46 per cent support, despite opposition from almost all political parties — a shock after which the government introduced some quotas for foreign workers among other measures.

From the 1990s Christoph Blocher, long a leading force in the People's Party, used popular initiatives as a partisan political strategy, seeking to rally votes against what he depicts as excessive immigration and European integration.

In 2009, Swiss voters backed a ban on the construction of minarets — a proposal widely criticised internationally as Islamophobic but approved by a clear majority. In 2014 came the successful mass immigration initiative, which called for quotas on immigration — including from the EU — but left their design undefined, creating a direct conflict with Switzerland's free movement agreements.

Other mould-breaking votes have been in the economic domain.

Last month the electorate resisted pressure from conservative and family groups in supporting measures to introduce taxation on an individual basis, breaking with the so-called marriage penalty that in effect penalises many working women.

In March 2024, Swiss voters backed a proposal — launched by trade unions and supported by left-of-centre parties — to introduce a bonus monthly pension payment once a year. There was fierce opposition from the government, parliament and business groups, who warned it was too costly.

It was approved, an indication that proposals once dismissed as politically unrealistic can now command majority support. The June vote on capping the population will be a much higher profile test of whether the old orthodoxy still stands.

“There have always been extreme proposals in Switzerland,” says Walter Thurnherr, former federal chancellor. “What is now less clear is that those extreme proposals won't be accepted.”

Despite the folk history surrounding the origins of Switzerland's direct democracy, the drives to hold referendums and initiatives are rarely spontaneous.

Data from the universities of Bern and Lausanne show they are increasingly launched by organised actors — political parties, interest groups and campaign organisations — with politicians often leading them to set an agenda.

“More mainstream parties have started using the initiative more systematically, it is not just on the left or the right,” says Georg Lutz, at Fors, the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences, who notes that more traditional groupings have learned from the insurgents of the People's Party.

He adds that the old Swiss establishment has lost the sway it once held as trust in economic institutions and business has deteriorated, especially after the global financial

crisis.

“If a big business lobby group such as Economiesuisse said ‘this is bad for the economy’ then basically no initiative would pass. This is not the case any more,” he argues, citing the Yes vote for bonus pensions.

Nowhere is the shift clearer than in Switzerland’s long and uneasy relationship with the EU. The latest flashpoint is an agreement that attempts to stabilise ties with Brussels and the single market after years of drift. The vote on closer integration is expected as early as next year. Even before details were finalised, political groups were positioning themselves. Kompass Europa, a campaign group backed by prominent rightwing business figures and political actors such as Blocher, seeks to mobilise opposition to closer alignment with the EU.

“There is a saying that one million francs can buy 100,000 signatures,” said one now-retired politician in Bern, reflecting a widely held view that money, used for fund campaigns, now matters earlier in the democratic chain than it once did.

For the People’s Party, which built much of its modern identity on resisting European integration, the terrain is well established. Its strategy is familiar: frame the issue early, simplify a complex set of treaties into a broader question of sovereignty and, if necessary, force a national vote.

Michael Hermann, a pollster at Zürich research group Sotomo, says initiatives have helped politicians learn what will mobilise voters: “What is new is they use them during election campaigns to show they are doing something on an issue. It’s more of a marketing instrument.”

Like the 10mn population cap initiative, the EU vote appears finely balanced, although — or because — the government and most business groups are in favour of the deal.

If the country votes no, EU officials have warned that maintaining the status quo is not an option.

In one scenario the measure could fail even if a majority of the population votes in favour — it is not yet clear if the vote will be subject to Switzerland’s double majority rule, which requires both a majority of voters and of the country’s 26 cantons for constitutional change.

The opponents of the EU deal calculate it is easier to win smaller, more conservative cantons than a national majority. “If the cantons end up being allowed to vote on the EU deal it will fail — even if the majority of Swiss vote yes,” says one Geneva-based wealth manager who is for the legislation. “Is that right, or fair?”

Even when they are not successful, votes can be highly contentious. An initiative to impose a 50 per cent inheritance tax on the super-rich was decisively rejected by Swiss voters in November last year.

But the referendum, launched by the far-left Young Socialists party, was one of the most divisive in recent years and prompted many wealthy people to leave.

Markus Somm, a Swiss journalist and historian, argues initiatives are often designed by leftwing parties not to pass but to push the government into action.

“They think it’s win-win,” he says. “They force [the government] to propose an alternative law to vote on, which is a little more in line with the popular initiative, but not so extreme.”

There are also more fundamental concerns. The Federal Chancellery — the body responsible for overseeing nationwide votes — has launched several investigations into allegations of forged signatures linked to commercial collection firms.

In January, police and federal prosecutors carried out searches of companies involved in collecting signatures for initiatives to change the constitution.

In several cases, authorities have uncovered evidence signatures in support of initiatives had been falsified, prompting criminal complaints and raising questions about the integrity of the process at a fundamental stage.

More concerning is votes not being counted. In March, a technical failure in the canton of Basel-Stadt meant that more than 2,000 electronic votes were not included in a federal ballot, prompting investigations.

“Direct democracy procedures in Switzerland rely heavily on citizens’ trust,” says Schaub at the University of Bern. “Should such incidents become more frequent, this could damage that foundation of trust.”

Nevertheless, debates often appear calmer than in many neighbouring countries. In a particularly sober moment, the country voted against granting itself more holidays in 2012. Referendums still tend to channel disagreement into votes and, in many cases, compromise. Different groups win and lose on different issues, and few feel consistently excluded.

Some, such as Gantner of Partners Group, resist the idea that Swiss direct democracy is spiralling out of control. Instead it may be reflecting tensions felt across the western world — while other nations are merely catching up.