Chapter XVII

Electronic Government in Switzerland: Priorities for 2001-2005–Electronic Voting and Federal Portal

Christine Poupa
Institute for Advanced Studies in Public Administration, Switzerland

This chapter presents some reference points about institutions of direct democracy in Switzerland and electronic democracy in Switzerland. It will then focus on two projects: electronic voting and federal portal (virtual office).

INSTITUTIONS OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN SWITZERLAND

The rules and institutions of direct democracy in Switzerland have to be presented, in order to understand the situation of Switzerland as far as electronic government is concerned.[1] Switzerland is a federal state. The Cantons are attributed far more responsibilities than the Confederation, including education–also at the university level–the police, religious services and health services. Justice and taxes are areas shared between the Confederation and the Cantons. The collection of taxes is the responsibility of the Cantons.

Switzerland has a semi-direct form of democracy that is neither parliamentary nor presidential, but is based on consensus and entente: parliament cannot bring down the government, who in turn cannot dissolve the parliament. It has various and ancient institutions of direct democracy on a Federal, Cantonal and communal level. Each of the four levels of decision, i.e., the people, the communes, the Cantons and the Confederation, sets store by its prerogatives. Any modification that would be perceived as a loss of control or power is rejected by the echelon concerned.

Federal Level

On a Federal level, Switzerland recognises (Mockli, 1993):

- the compulsory constitutional referendum for the total or partial revision of the Constitution, since 1848;
- the optional legal referendum, since 1874;
- the popular initiative for the partial revision of the Constitution, since 1891;
- the referendum on international treaties, since 1921 and enlarged since 1977;
- the annulment referendum regarding urgent Federal decisions, since 1949.

The referendum, an institution initiated from either top or bottom according to precise rules, has a conservative role, i.e., to reject a form of evolution by constituting a means of veto. The referendum refers to a project developed by the political class: administrative, executive or parliament. The popular initiative has an innovative role. It is initiated by civilian society, and can also serve to short-circuit the decision-making process. The official reaction of the political class to a popular initiative is called a counter-project. The results of the consultations can be compulsory or optional. Parliamentary decisions are therefore not definitive or obligatory since a group–and including an extra-parliamentary one–can ask to consult the people directly, by means of an initiative. Among the tools available to the people, we should also mention the petition, which can be submitted to any authority but a response is not compulsory.

The citizens must collect a certain number of signatures within a limited time. (Mockli, 1993, Papadopoulos, 1994): on a Federal level, since 1977, this number is 50,000 signatures (previously: 30,000) from citizens or from eight Cantons, within a time limit of 100 days in order to initiate a referendum, and 100,000 signatures (previously: 50,000 signatures) in 18 months for an initiative. The time limit runs from the publication of the title and the text proposed by an initiative committee of at least seven persons in the official Federal Journal.[2] An initiative can take place if sufficient bona fide signatures are collected within the time limit laid down. The Federal Council[3] then has 24 months to submit a message to the Federal Assembly and a request for a popular initiative. The time limit is 30 months if the Federal Council chooses to submit a counter-project to the Federal Assembly. The Federal Assembly, in turn, has four years in order to decide whether or not it approves the initiative.

If, as is often the case, the Federal Assembly rejects the initiative, it must be submitted "to the people and the states for adoption or rejection."[4] It is therefore possible that it takes up to seven years between the submission of an initiative and consultation of the public.

In order for a referendum to be adopted, it must obtain the majority of electors' votes. For an initiative to be adopted, it must obtain a double majority: that of the electorate and that of the Cantons. In such cases, the small rural Cantons, each with 15,000 to 120,000 inhabitants, have as much weight as the urban Cantons such as Zurich with 1,175,000 inhabitants. This double majority is aimed at preserving the rights of the rural minorities.

If we refer to the period 1970-1987 (Papadopoulos, 1994), the citizens have by no means always approved and accepted decisions made by the government and the parliament. There have been 98 federal votes, not counting the initiatives. The acceptance rate by the people stands at 84.5% for issues submitted to a compulsory referendum, 61.5% for issues submitted to an optional referendum and 64.3% for counter projects. The Swiss people therefore have the real power to influence the policy of its elected representatives, government or parliament.

Related Content

E-Government and Multi-Level Governance: A Comparative Examination of Catalonia, Spain, and Ontario, Canada
Mila Gascóand Jeffrey Roy (2006). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 57-75).*
www.irma-international.org/article/government-multi-level-governance/2023

Implementing Free Wi-Fi in Public Parks: An Empirical Study in Qatar
Shafi Al-Shafiand Vishanth Weerakkody (2011). *Applied Technology Integration in Governmental Organizations: New E-Government Research (pp. 201-214).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/implementing-free-public-parks/49343

Horizontal Process Integration in E-Government: The Perspective of a UK Local Authority
Jyoti Choudrieand Vishanth Weerrakody (2007). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 22-39).*
www.irma-international.org/article/horizontal-process-integration-government/2033

Enabling Instruments for Digital Access and e-Government in Zimbabwe
Lawton Hikwaand Esabel Maisiri (2014). *Digital Access and E-Government: Perspectives from Developing and Emerging Countries (pp. 271-283).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/enabling-instruments-for-digital-access-and-e-government-in-zimbabwe/107177

COVID-19 Pandemic: Assessment of Behavior and Attitudes in Medical Waste Management Among Healthcare Workers in Kuwait
Fatimah Al-Dashti, Anwaar Mohammad Alkandari, Shihanah AlMutairiand Ahmed Al-Saber (2022). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 1-21).*
www.irma-international.org/article/covid-19-pandemic/313176