

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

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CITIZEN INITIATED REFERENDUMS SAFEGUARD RIGHTS

Almost all democracies today are elective partyocracies where ordinary citizens have less say than they did in ancient Rome, let alone a modern democracy like Switzerland.

The word democracy derives from 'démokratia', which means people-power, a term invented to describe the system put in place by Cleisthenes in Athens (508 BCE), where citizens could turn up at the Assembly to vote on any legislation.

Democracy today is generally considered to be the right to vote for a party (or independent), with ordinary people having no direct say on the legislative process except at government initiated referendums.

Switzerland, the most successful multicultural nation, is the only country with direct democracy at regional and federal levels. It has much less violent crime, a higher median income, a better health system, and a much smaller percentage of people below the poverty line than Australia despite having few natural resources.

Vested interests want to maintain the status quo for fear of losing power and influence so oppose CIR, using much the same arguments that were used against universal suffrage in the 19th century. Switzerland shows us that CIR is beneficial and will not lead to anarchy.



There are two main tools of direct democracy, the 'initiative' and 'referenda'.

The initiative allows citizens to force the government to hold a referendum to amend the constitution if they get enough votes on a petition within a set time frame (the government can propose a counter-initiative); while the less radical referenda allows the people to veto a bill approved by Parliament.

Direct democracy makes governments more accountable, thus more respectful of the rights and needs of the electorate. Empowering the people in this manner also causes them to become more responsible.

We support an improved version of the binding Swiss model, which would allow voters to veto government legislation by voting against a bill passed by Parliament via secure ATM type machines (within 30 days), as well as create, amend or repeal legislation via an initiative held in conjunction with elections.

As occurred in Switzerland, legislatures become more attuned to the wishes of the electorate when CIR is introduced, it being one more check against the arbitrary use of state power that allows citizens to vote for the most responsible party even if they detest some of their policies.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Direct democracy makes governments more accountable, making it less likely that human rights abuses will occur.
- CIR also encourages egalitarianism and individual responsibility.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce initiatives and referenda at federal and regional levels.
- Introduce electronic ballot boxes to allow citizens to veto parliamentary bills.

FURTHER READING

Government By All The People, Delos F. Wilcox, PH.D., The Macmillan Company, 1912.

Referendums: A Comparative Study of Practice and Theory, David Butler & Austin Ranney, American Enterprise Institute, 1978.

CIR MYTHS

1. *A few bigots will be able to create bad laws.*

Our model has an Italian style 50 percent participation rule (used for federal referendums in Italy) and all initiatives would be held in conjunction with elections (which have very high voter turnouts).

2. *Voters will be swamped with initiatives.*

This is easily addressed by requiring a large number of signatures on initiative petitions (not less than five percent of all registered voters) to prevent frivolous initiatives that have no hope of success.

3. *Initiatives will hamstring the government.*

Our model (unlike California's) allows the government to hold a referendum between elections in order to repeal or modify a law introduced by an initiative if it ever proved to be a problem (a sensible safeguard).

