

Swiss people have no wish to elect the Federal Council

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Swiss people have no wish to elect the Federal Council

The Swiss people do not want to elect their government themselves. The “popular election of the Federal Council” initiative suffered an overwhelming defeat on 9 June 2013 with over 76% of the electorate voting against it.

By Jürg Müller

The Swiss People’s Party (SVP), which launched the popular initiative, went to great lengths to promote it, displaying giant posters with the slogan “Trust the people” and providing every Swiss household with a “special pamphlet”. The people should elect the Federal Council “to prevent Switzerland from collapse”, this proclaimed in big letters. That was something of an exaggeration. At any rate, their fervour did not spread. The fierce referendum campaign failed to materialise despite this being a fundamental issue in terms of the organisation of the Swiss state. The initiative’s opponents achieved their goal without any major anti-initiative propaganda.



The Swiss people will remain spectators in the election of the Federal Council

The SVP argued that the election of the Federal Council by the people rather than Parliament would be in line with the proven model used to elect the cantonal governments. The rights of the people would be enhanced, the principle of the sovereignty of the people would gain respect and the separation of powers would be strengthened. The opponents countered that popular election would ultimately turn the members of the government into pawns in party politics, overshadowing the real business of politics. They also warned of constant election campaigning involving huge costs.

The SVP’s heaviest defeat

The defeat was not unexpected, but the margin came as a surprise to everyone. No SVP initiative has ever been so comprehensively rejected. This is partly explained by the fact that the SVP did not even completely succeed in convincing its own supporters. Various party figures and sections openly supported a “no” vote. This defeat also indicates that proposals based on mistrust of existing institutions do not go down well with the people. Last year, the popular initiative calling for state treaties to be put before the people was rejected by around 75% of the electorate. The “sovereignty of the people instead of official propaganda” initiative, which sought to muzzle the Federal Council, was rejected by a similar margin in 2008. The “naturalisation to be decided by the people” initiative was also resoundingly defeated in 2008 with just under 64% opposing it. (comment right)

An act of wise self-restraint

No committee is more discussed in Switzerland than the Federal Council whose seven Federal Councillors enjoy permanent public attention. Yet the Swiss have not seized the opportunity to elect their political stars themselves by direct popular election. Is that not contradictory? No, it is an act of wise self-restraint. The Swiss are not filled with unquestioning faith in authority, but they have a well-developed sense of the importance of balanced and stable political institutions. Vehement criticism is levelled at the members of national government from time to time, but there is also a high degree of respect for the institution. Despite all the nay-saying, surveys indicate that the Federal Council enjoys high-level and recently even growing confidence.

The rejection of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) initiative for the popular election of the Federal Council (see article left) represents an impressive vote of confidence in an extremely successful political system. There is no reason to disturb the finely balanced equilibrium between the people, Parliament and government. That is precisely what a system of popular election would have done.

There is no country in the world where the people have as much influence as in Switzerland. Extensive use is also made of direct democracy, and this is a major factor in Swiss stability. After all, where specialist issues are comprehensively debated and decided upon by the people, there is also greater acceptance of political decisions. That is the cornerstone of direct democracy. Popular election would not have enhanced political co-determination but at most may have heightened the political spectacle at the expense of continuity in government.

ASYLUM LAW TIGHTENED UP AGAIN

Asylum applications may no longer be submitted to Swiss embassies, unruly asylum seekers can be detained in special facilities, and federal government can open asylum centres without cantonal and communal authorisation. These amendments to asylum law were approved by the Swiss people on 9 June 2013 with over 78% voting in favour. The referendum against the proposals had been called by left-wing groups. This is the fifth time that asylum law has been tightened up in the past 25 years and five referenda against the changes have failed. The overwhelming approval indicates that many on the left also supported Social Democratic Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga, who said the bill would help to speed up the asylum process. Political analyst Claude Longchamp explained on Swiss television (SRF) that it was more a case of voters expressing their general discontent with asylum policy than approving a particular bill. (JM)

JÜRIG MÜLLER