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The World's Greatest Democracy?

By [Laura Secorun Palet](#) MAR 19, 2015

If you ask a Swiss person who their president is, they likely won't be able to tell you. And it's not because they are politically apathetic or uninformed. In Switzerland, citizens don't vote for their president.

Introducing Switzerland's peculiar brand of direct democracy. In this small alpine country, citizens elect a new Parliament every four years, and the Parliament chooses a group of seven councilors from different parties. *They* are the head of state. The presidency (a mostly symbolic role) rotates among the members every year. But the keystone of Swiss democracy is the regular use of [referendums](#), in which citizens vote on everything from their town's new sports center to the country's immigration policy.

It's a pretty empowering idea because, as Michael Bechtel, professor of political science at the University of St. Gallen, explains, in a direct democracy there is "a stronger incentive for political elites to take into account citizen preferences when making choices." It might sound like a panacea for Occupy Wall Street types, but this is actually a complex system with both advantages and disadvantages.

Decisions aren't final: If a law has already been passed, people can still overturn it by getting 50,000 signatures in 100 days.

Referendums give citizens year-round political leverage. They also allow for more nuanced political views. A person can be both pro-environment and against gay marriage. Further, voting is easy. With no need to register, every citizen receives a



ballot for each vote, which can be returned by mail. Electoral turnover varies widely depending on the issue but, on average, it's about [46 percent](#).

And decisions aren't final. If a law has already been passed, people can still overturn it by getting 50,000 signatures in 100 days. The bill then has to be voted on by the public. And if that wasn't enough, Swiss citizens can also suggest their own laws by "[popular initiative](#)." If 100,000 people ask for a change in the constitution, the Parliament is obligated to discuss it and submit the proposal to a popular vote.

To be sure, there are pitfalls. Popular votes can lead to a tyranny of the majority, making it easy to discriminate against small groups. In 2009, a law was passed with [57 percent](#) of the votes in favor of banning the construction of minarets — mosque towers — even if the government emphatically opposed the ban. This system also slows down the law-making process and makes it more difficult to get on the same page with international rulings like those of the European Union.

Could other nations benefit from direct democracy? Maybe, but the prerequisites are high. Besides being a well-educated electorate with basic inalienable rights, they must be able to see past party lines. "It comes down to how much you trust your fellow citizens," says Klaus Dingwerth, political scientist and fellow at the [Global Public Policy Institute](#).

The Swiss certainly trust each other. And why not?

This system has been working for us since 1848.

Conclusion: It's all about trust, history and tradition.



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