

#SwissBreakfast

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Direct Democracy – an antidote to populism?

Modern representative democracy is at stake. The challenges come from all sides: on the one hand from the globalised economy, which transcends in many ways the reach of national democracies, and on the other hand from populist movements trying to undermine the rule of law and the traditional separation of powers.

The definition of populism is subject to debate. However, most of political scientists tend to agree on shared criteria: Firstly, a glorification of the *people*, supposedly homogenous. Second, a sovereignty which needs to be defended and must be exercised without interference. And finally, anti-elite speeches, which usually lead to the designation of a scapegoat.

Over the past years a rise in popular votes in countries all over Europe has been observed, with the most famous example to date being the Brexit vote in June 2016. But this phenomenon can also be observed elsewhere, such as in Ireland in May 2015 with the legalisation of same-sex marriage and in 2018 the legalisation of abortion, in the Netherlands in April 2016 where a majority rejects the Association Agreement between the European Union and Ukraine in a consultative vote, in Italy with the constitutional referendum in December 2016 or recently in Macedonia, where in September 2018 a majority of the population agreed to change the country's name to "North-Macedonia". The instruments of participative democracy are perhaps the most comprehensive in Switzerland. Established already in 1874 and 1891, the semi-direct democracy system allows citizens to participate in the agenda setting but also to be at the very heart of the decision-making process. On average, Swiss citizens vote four to five times a year either at the federal, cantonal and communal level. The subjects vary from tax reform, to the place of religion, the establishment of a paternity leave or the possibility for pets to have lawyers. Thanks to its use of the initiative and referendum process, Switzerland has become a reference in debates on modern democracy.

With the European elections fast approaching, voices are rising in EU Member States to demand more direct participation in the decision making process. For instance, since the beginning of their protest, the *gilets jaunes* movements have called for the creation of the *RIC (référéndum d'initiative citoyenne)*. Calls to hold more referendum at national levels are also regularly made by movements commonly seen as populist such as Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* in France, Grillo's *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy etc. But what about the EU level? The European Citizen's Initiative (ECI) is widely unknown. Its format does not imply a popular European vote but rather asks the European Commission to suggest new legislation. Yet, since its introduction by the Lisbon Treaty, most of the propositions failed, only four succeeded (the most famous one demanding the ban of glyphosate (2017)). So, is this instrument really worth it? In December 2018, the European Parliament and the Council reached a political agreement to make it easier to organise an ECI. Can instruments like the ECI unleash the potential of direct democracy at the EU level?

Since the last European elections in 2014, every election held across Europe has raised the same question "how successful will the populist parties be?" From Spain, to Hungary, Denmark or Greece, rise of populist movements are closely watched. Switzerland is not usually quoted as subject to a populist wave. Is it because Swiss political parties have a legal way to express their "populist" ideas? Is this related to the Swiss unique and very long practise of direct democracy format? Can direct democracy help restrain populist movements and become their antidote? Are referendum and initiative systems the only response to fulfill a complete democratic approach? How can governments and institutions meet the demand for a more participative democracy and facilitate a bottom-up approach?