

The UK would reap the benefits if it were to adopt the Swiss model of direct democracy

By Democratic Audit UK

Switzerland has long had a model of direct democracy which has allowed citizens direct influence over Government legislation, should the requisite threshold be passed on a public petition. **Vittorio Trevitt** argues that their system has much to commend it, and that Westminster politicians ought to seriously consider adopting it in the UK.



In countries throughout the world, people tend to associate democracy with their ability to choose, through secret ballot, their representatives in government, both local and national. While this is an essential part of the democratic process, democracy is also about the ability to influence key decisions and policy proposals that affect the lives of ordinary citizens, including those that many people did not even vote for in legislative or local elections. The decision by the British government to send troops to Iraq in [March 2003](#), for instance, was not voted for by the general public, but by members of Parliament, who did not offer that choice to the nation as a whole.

This was in spite of the fact that various polls from February that year showed that a majority of voters [were against](#) military action in Iraq. There is, however, a model worth adopting here in the United Kingdom that would not only enhance the ability of ordinary people to shape key decisions in policy making, but also potentially lead to wider political involvement in the future. That model is the Swiss system of direct democracy.

Under Switzerland's system of direct democracy, people have the right to both put forward policy proposals and to [challenge legislation](#) approved by parliament. In regards to the former, [members of the public](#) have the right to launch popular initiatives on legislative proposals they put forward. This is on the condition that 100,000 signatures are gathered endorsing such suggestions, with the outcome of a vote on whether or not such proposals should be adopted [legally binding](#).

In terms of the latter, people opposed to laws approved by the Swiss National Assembly can instigate referendums asking the public whether or not they feel the approved legislation should go ahead, as long as 50,000 signatures are collected [within 100 days of a disputed law or decree being published in the Federal Gazette](#).

One practical benefit of direct democracy in Switzerland is that it has encouraged elected representatives to carry out their work efficiently, as they know that their actions are [closely scrutinised](#) by the general public. It has also been credited with encouraging political involvement and enabling people to vote on issues [more directly](#), and those who advocate greater democratic participation here in the United Kingdom could justifiably look to Switzerland's direct democracy model as a source of inspiration.

Critics have put forward various arguments against referendums (one of the key elements of direct democracy), such as one argument that referendums hand over technical issues to voters who lack the [time and expertise](#) that legislators have to tackle these issues, and another that lower rates of turnout at referendums than at general elections in many countries demonstrates that referendums do not enhance the legitimacy of political decisions. There are, however, numerous instances in which referendums can be utilised effectively.

In cases where a party in government is divided over a particular issue which threatens to split it, the holding of a referendum can help to prevent such a dire outcome from occurring. An example of this can be found in the 1975 referendum in Britain, in which the public was asked if the UK should remain in the European Economic Community or break away (an issue that had led to [sharp divisions](#) within the governing Labour Party). Most participants voted for the continuation of Britain's EEC membership, an outcome that constituted a victory for the government.

In response to the low voter turnout argument, while only around 45% of eligible voters turn out to vote in referendums in Switzerland, more than 45% of electors actually take part in the country's system of direct democracy [as different voters](#) take part in the different votes that interest them. In fact, overall annual participation in referendums in Switzerland [stands at 80%](#), highlighting the faith that the people of Switzerland have in their [long-established](#) system of direct democracy.

It is true to say that people may be more inclined to vote if there is at least one issue that a referendum is held on that has great appeal to them, rather than a raft of pledges like those issued in the manifestos of political parties which (despite laying out their intentions to voters of what they wish to accomplish in government) may hold little interest to them. A case in point is the independence referendum in Scotland this year, in which [84.5% of eligible voters](#) turned out to vote on a single issue affecting the future of all Scots: whether Scotland should become an independent nation or remain part of the United Kingdom. This contrasts sharply with the 2010 general election, in which [only 63.8%](#) of Scots participated, clearly demonstrating the extent to which referendums can increase levels of democratic participation.

Across the globe, direct democracy has proven itself to be an essential part of democratic institutions, providing people with the opportunity to vote on particular issues rather than just for a particular party. A number of American states make use of referendums, perhaps most notably California, whose form of "direct democracy" has enabled voters to decide on a [wide range of issues](#) such as gun control, immigration, and educational policy. In various nations, referendums have often played an important role in encouraging key social, political, and economic developments.

A [1946 referendum](#) in Australia gave the federal government the power to provide a wide range of social benefits such as child allowances and medical and dental services, while a later referendum held in 1967 granted Aborigines [the right to citizenship](#). Referendums have also led to major constitutional changes in a number of countries, with a [2008 referendum in Ecuador](#) leading to the adoption of a progressive constitution giving citizens certain rights such as universal access to healthcare, education, and pensions. A year later, a [referendum in neighbouring Bolivia](#) resulted in people voting for a new constitution enshrining various rights for indigenous people, who comprise the majority of Bolivia's population.

Apart from encouraging greater political participation, the adoption of a Swiss-style system of direct democracy in the United Kingdom could also hold politicians to account when they attempt to implement policies that either go against what they had pledged at election time, or what they didn't promise at all. The decisions to cap benefit increases and introduce the controversial Bedroom Tax, for instance, did not feature in the [Coalition Agreement](#), and could have been put to public referendums so that voters could have decided for themselves if such policies should have been implemented, given the fact that such policy decisions affect such a large swathe of British society.

At a time of [increasing levels of distrust](#) in political figures, the adoption of the Swiss model of direct democracy in Britain could have the potential to increase people's faith in their elected politicians, with governments obliged to accept the wishes of the general public on whatever issues they vote on. This would make people currently cynical about the British political system feel that they have a real say in the running of the country and, if realised, could prove itself to be one of the most important democratic developments in the history of our nation.

Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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