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Politics

How referendums have shaped the European project

Switzerland is not the only nation with a history of holding votes on Europe. Over the past half-century, voters in almost 30 countries have been asked over 60 times to say yes or no to "more" Europe. Meanwhile, efforts are ongoing to establish a pan-European referendum process.

The imagery ahead of the September 27 vote in Switzerland on a labour accord with the European Union (EU) is as crude as usual.

The anti-EU campaign poster shows a cartoon worker wearing a belt studded with EU stars, crushing the red and white map of Switzerland with his wide rear end.

With the visual, the forces behind the people's initiative for more "moderate" immigration levels are trying to show the pressures placed on the Swiss job market by a free movement agreement signed with Brussels over 20 years ago.

Since then, various aspects of the deal have been subject to debate, both by parliament and the people. At the time, 67.5% of voters approved the agreement. But several extensions – especially concerning new EU member states in Central Europe – garnered slimmer majorities of 53-59% in popular votes during the 2000s.

In 2014, an initiative to limit free movement (the "mass immigration initiative") won a wafer-thin victory, triggering a series of efforts to finetune the delicate institutional contract between Brussels and Bern – changes that spurred the forthcoming vote on September 27, the 12th time in Swiss history that the people will decide the European issue.

'Switzerland is very European - and Europe has become much more Swiss'

"No other country in Europe offers as many tools and procedures for direct citizen involvement in decision making as Switzerland," says Zoltan Pallinger, professor of political science at Andrassy University in Budapest.

Together with colleagues from across Europe, Pallinger has contributed to a comprehensive report ordered by the European Commission to assess the future use of direct democracy in and on Europe. "When it comes to the EU, Switzerland is in fact very European – and Europe has become much more Swiss", Pallinger says, referring to the fact that almost 30 countries have held nationwide votes on integration issues since 1972.

The precursor to today's EU (which got its name in 1993) was the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1952, and the European Economic Community (1957). The founding fathers of this process – which aimed to prevent any recurrence of the conflicts which resulted in the World Wars – weren't keen on including citizens directly in the process. Their project was directed against the nationalist sentiments that had led to violence in the past – a goal that enjoyed great legitimacy among most post-war Europeans.

However, at the beginning of the 1960s, French president Charles de Gaulle began to understand that any further integration at the European level would require the direct approval of citizens. "Europe will be born on the day when the different peoples fundamentally decide to join. This will require referendums," de Gaulle declared.

Constitutionally required – or just appropriate

Indeed it was the French who organised the first nationwide referendum on Europe, on April 23, 1972. Irish, Norwegian, Danish and Swiss citizens would also get their say on the European question that same year. After this initial European opening to direct democracy, more and more people began to have the opportunity to become decision-makers.

"We have seen different types and logics when it comes to European referendums," says Zurich University researcher Fernando Mendez, a co-author of the European Commission study. "Many ballots are constitutionally required – for example in Ireland – while others are simply appropriate, for example when a country wants to become a member".

Other voting processes, triggered by a citizens' initiative or offered by an under-pressure government – as when British Prime Minister David Cameron decided to hold an advisory plebiscite leading to Brexit – "are much trickier", says Mendez. "The consequences may be open to various political interpretations."

Overall, historically, the majority – about two thirds – of nationwide referendums on Europe have approved the proposed integration steps.

"We have found at least three big advantages of letting citizens decide on Europe", says Alois Stutzer, professor of political economy at Basel University. "The European project gains legitimacy, the path of integration is in line with the preferences of the people and citizens become knowledgeable on the issue." On this last point, Stutzer's research has shown that an average Swiss citizen is better informed on some European issues than an average member of the German parliament.

But like many scholars of European affairs, Stutzer would welcome the establishment of a pan-European referendum process.

"Such a transnational popular voting process would clearly strengthen the EU and make it more capable of dealing with big global challenges, he says.

Or as Irish EU correspondent Dan O'Brien has noted, such a project could also "inject a dose of human drama into the technocratic machinery of EU integration."

The future of Europe – and modern direct democracy

The 62nd nationwide referendum on a European issue on September 27 comes at another crossroads of European history. This year, the bloc of 27 member states hopes to conclude the painful process of getting Brexit done; it also hopes to move ahead with the Conference on the Future of Europe, the first constitutional review process since the 2002-2003 Convention on the Future of Europe.

"We want to encourage the active participation of citizens in this process", said Croatian State Secretary of European Affairs, Andreja Metelko-Zgombi?, when launching the conference earlier this summer. And yet, in spite of both the normative and empirical reasons for using the referendum process in European politics, many leading politicians – mainly among the dominant political camps of the social democrats and conservatives – are still sceptical when it comes to sharing power on Europe with the voters.

Two decades ago, the Convention on the Future of Europe – itself the consequence of a popular vote, the Irish "no" to the Nice Treaty – discussed a whole set of initiatives and referendum tools to be introduced at the EU level. In the end, majorities of the Convention members voted in favour of these reforms, while the chairperson – former French president Valéry Giscard D'Estaing, a gate-keeper for member state governments – vetoed the move.

Instead, Giscard d'Estaing suggested the establishment of a pan-European citizens' initiative tool, whereby one million citizens from at least seven different member states could join forces to propose legislation to the European Commission – a "baby-step towards

transnational direct democracy", as Maja Setäla, professor of political science at Turku University in Finland, describes it.

Since its eventual establishment in 2012, some 100 European Citizens' Initiatives have been launched. One of the first such proposals wanted the European Commission to end free movement with Switzerland – something the Swiss themselves will decide on September 27.