



Referendums in Switzerland: the communication challenges

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Direct Democracy



The People are Sovereign



Referendums at the heart

- The people exercise sovereignty in referendums
- Government, Parliament are subsidiary
- Most political decisions taken locally



Referendums: what for?

- To change a law
- To make a new law
- For or against major spending
- Infrastructure projects
- More or less taxes
- More or less social spending ... etc



How are referendums organised?

- Governments put laws to referendum
- Or ... signatures of 1% of electorate
- 3 to 4 voting days per year
- Up to 6 subjects each time
- Technical subjects grouped with popular issues



Political Consequences

- Consensus
- No extremes
- Broad coalition governments
- Responsible citizens
- Political stability
- Change is slow



Constraints on Government communication

- Government does not advertise
- Government does not employ PR
- Government communicators act neutrally



Arguments for and against

6



What ministers *can* do

- Lead minister develops messages
- Makes speeches
- 1 TV spot
- Appears on TV round-tables
- Supported by other ministers



Who communicates most?

- Political parties



FDP
Die Liberalen



- Lobby groups



swissnuclear
Fachgruppe Kernenergie der swisselectric



Soft communication ...



... and hard communication



Drawbacks of Swiss referendums

- No great understanding
- Indifference (40% participation)
- Hate messages
- Attempts to manipulate
- Can lead to frustration
- Slow



But ...

- Referendums are popular
- People feel involved
- No political tendency is excluded
- More possibility for reflection
- Decisions stick
- Economic prosperity



Concluding remarks

- Social media open up democracy
- More referendums, not less
- Communicate to encourage voting
- Explain issues better
- Respect the decisions of the people
- Be patient: only 20 years of statehood

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