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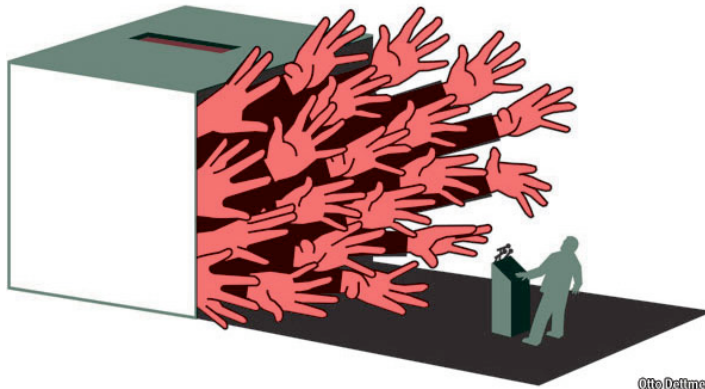
Direct democracy

Vox populi or hoi polloi?

Does more voting necessarily mean more democracy? People power has its perils

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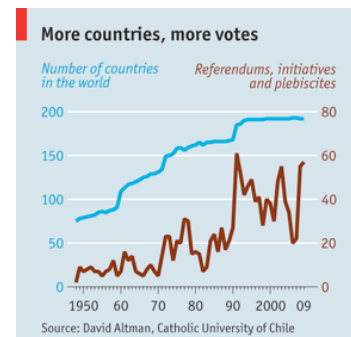
IN 2004, while tossing chunks of meat to his pet Bengal tigers, Saif Qaddafi (then seen as the Libyan ruler's reformist scion) outlined to a foreign visitor his plans to convert his father's rambling theory of direct democracy into a real political system. Something on Swiss lines would be ideal.

The particular ambition may seem risible now. Yet the general sentiment is common. The Alpine federation's political system, in which citizens may vote 30-plus times a year in a mixture of local and national polls, is proving seductive for politicians and voters of all stripes.

Some Swiss votes are ordered by politicians, yet many, known as "initiatives", are binding votes on national legislation triggered by citizens' petitions. In recent years these have widened state health-insurance to cover alternative medicine; enforced deportation of foreigners guilty of serious crimes and benefit fraud; and banned the building of mosques with minarets.

Helvetian zeal for direct votes skews global statistics. Nearly a quarter of all recorded national referendums have taken place there. Countries hold almost twice as many referendums as they did 50 years ago, says David Altman, a political scientist at the Catholic University of Chile. In the past 20 years more than 100 have introduced some sort of direct voting, says the Initiative and Referendum Institute Europe (IRI-E), a think-tank.

Politicians may be getting keener on public support for new laws. But few want to allow voters to write them: that would be not so much democracy, they say, as ochlocracy—mob rule. Compact and cohesive electorates, such as in a Swiss canton, are unusually good places for such votes to work: voters are more likely to ponder the issues fully beforehand, and to deal maturely with the result afterwards.



So only a few countries give voters Swiss-style rights to take their own proposals to the ballot box. Of all the citizen-initiated nationwide votes recorded since the 1980s, 90% have taken place in Switzerland and six other states: Italy, Liechtenstein, Uruguay, Lithuania, Latvia and Hungary. The regional picture is different, though. Though the United States is one of the few democracies never to have held a national referendum, Californians were asked to vote on 14 local issues last year. Since 1996 Japan has had several hundred local polls.

Pan-European votes are in the offing too. From April 1st 2012 the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) will allow petitioners in the European Union to propose legislation to the European Commission. Among the several criteria is finding 1m signatories (0.2% of the EU population) from a quarter of member countries. "Manifestly abusive, frivolous or vexatious" initiatives are excluded. Carsten Berg of Democracy International (a pressure group that campaigned for the ECI) notes that a successful petition does not trigger a public vote or even a parliamentary debate. It only obliges the Eurocrats to respond. Petitions already under way include a proposal to halt the introduction of genetically modified crops, and one that would bar Turkey from the EU for ever. Another wants shops to close on Sundays.

Laurence Modrego of Fleishman-Hillard, a Brussels consultancy, thinks the rise of internet voting is "game-changing". Activists used to need lots of time and money to gather support across international borders. Now planned internet-petitioning schemes make it easier. They also reduce the role of paid signature-gatherers, who plague Californian democracy (see our special report in this issue). But Bruno Kaufmann, president of IRI-E, says e-voting is not a means to speed up the democratic process. It can take many years for Swiss initiatives to pass into law. That works better than in California.

Ballot blocks

The sunshine state's experience certainly casts a cloud over the enthusiasm for direct democracy. Citizen initiatives there are blamed for fiscal ruin and incoherent, contradictory mandates. Fans of direct democracy argue that California's woes stem from the practice, not the concept. Some say that flaws in representative forms of democracy make reform essential. Mr Kaufmann says that voters increasingly want to engage in politics "issue by issue". Greenpeace, founded in 1971, has nearly 3m paying members. Over the same period, trust in political parties has shrivelled. In America "independents" now outnumber Republicans or Democrats.

Yet direct democracy does not always give power to the people. Sometimes, says Mr Altman, it can "give people to the powerful". Referendums in democratic countries may now far outnumber the sham plebiscites beloved of autocratic rulers. Yet heavy-handed rulers continue to hijack the fashion for direct democracy to quell dissent or circumvent parliamentary limitations on their power. In November Andry Rajoelina, a 36-year-old former disc-jockey who took power in Madagascar after a military coup, called a plebiscite to approve a new constitution—and keep him in control. In 2009 Hugo Chávez, who says his goal is to rule Venezuela until at least 2030, used a popular vote to abolish the term limit on his presidency. Authoritarian rulers rarely lose such votes.

The genie of direct democracy is hard to rebottle when released, even if the results prove dysfunctional or perverse. Mr Altman says that once empowered to pass legislation, electorates rarely initiate votes that might limit their own power. In that respect, politicians and the people have much in common.

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