

Across Switzerland, people power rules

No bill can become law until approved in a referendum

Helena Bachmann
Special for USA TODAY

GENEVA When the Swiss go to the polls Sunday to elect a new parliament, it will be a familiar trudge. That's because citizens regularly are asked to approve a wide array of legislation, ranging from housing for sex workers in Zurich to approval of assisted suicide in nursing homes.

The active role the Swiss play in enacting laws may seem strange in the United States and other nations where elected officials make decisions on behalf of their constituents. But not in Switzerland, where a centuries-old tradition of direct democracy gives people — rather than lawmakers — the power to shape local and national policies.

That power of the people explains why the 246 members of parliament, who will be elected to four-year terms, aren't career politicians. The public has the final word to change laws or create new ones through frequent referendums.

"Switzerland's political system is exceptional when compared to other democracies," said Adrian Ritz of the Center of Competence for Public Management at the University of Bern.

No measure can become a law here until citizens approve it. Any constitutional change proposed by the parliament, for instance, must be approved in a referendum.

On average, the Swiss vote four times a year on several issues at a time — more often than citizens of any other nation.

One such issue was the government's 2008 proposal to renew Switzerland's publicly funded heroin distribution program. It was overwhelmingly approved, because voters saw it as an effective way to keep addicts off the streets and reduce crime.

Also, any national, state or municipal law can be vetoed, because the public has the right to put every piece of legislation to a



Visitors walk next to a sign on Aug. 24, 2013, during an open day at a sex drive-in, which was unveiled by the city of Zurich. Local authorities say it enabled them to keep closer tabs on prostitution, a year after voters backed the plan.

referendum. All it takes is a petition with 50,000 legitimate signatures presented to the federal administration office.

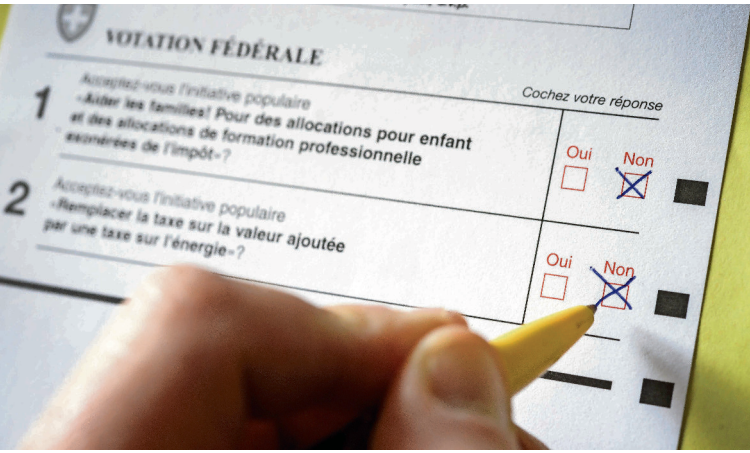
And the Swiss can create their own laws through citizen-driven initiatives. To get an initiative on a ballot, a petition with 100,000 signatures is required.

Among the successful initiatives launched in recent years was approving the deportation of immigrants who commit violent crimes in Switzerland.

One of the wackiest citizen initiatives was a 2010 push by animal rights activists that would require the government to appoint lawyers to represent animals in court. The voters rejected that proposal since Switzerland already has strict laws protecting pets and farm animals.

While some issues are trivial, the system limits polarization. "The threat of an initiative or a referendum creates a high degree of consensus," Ritz said.

Swiss people power can also



A man crosses a box on a ballot paper in Lausanne as two popular initiatives, a tax exemption for family allowances and an energy tax, were rejected by Swiss citizens on March 8.

make waves beyond the country's borders. Last year, voters defied government recommendations and approved curbing immigration from European Union countries to protect Switzerland's workforce. The vote nullified a

treaty between Switzerland and the 28-nation EU that allowed citizens of EU countries to live and work in the Alpine nation. The Swiss government is still trying to deal with the fallout.

That's why the grass-roots sys-

tem has some critics. Edward Girardet, managing editor of the local English language newspaper *LeNews*, argued that direct democracy is "not the way to run a country responsibly."

"Would it not be better to have parliamentarians decide?" he wrote in an editorial. "After all, that's their job and that's why we elect them."

Ritz added that putting so many laws to a vote means "the political decision-making process is comparably slow."

Some legislators who say the system spawns too many initiatives are calling for more restrictive guidelines. One lawmaker suggested that in addition to the 50,000 signatures required for a referendum, 50 members of parliament must also approve the proposed initiative.

This measure, too, would first have to be put to a vote. And the Swiss are unlikely to adopt a law that curbs their own power, Ritz predicted.



'Candy shop' of dinosaur fossils found in Utah

Traci Watson
Special for USA TODAY

Scientists found an unprecedented cache of fossils of weird animals that thrived at a desert oasis about 200 million years ago, providing a snapshot of a place and time that have long been a mystery.

The fossils include the bones of a fanged flying predator and creatures that looked like tiny crocodiles with a Chihuahua's legs. Small reptiles whose "hands" resemble a mole's lived alongside dinosaurs that scampered on their hind legs.

Researchers suspect many of the fossils represent entirely new species. "Probably almost everything we're finding (at the site) is previously unknown to science," says Dan Chure of Dinosaur National Monument, one of the site's co-discoverers. "It's just an amazing paleontological candy shop."

The fossils are "a spectacular find," says University of Utah paleontologist Randall Irmis, who isn't involved in the project. "We so rarely get sites that preserve such a variety of different animals from the beginning of the age of dinosaurs."

The animals at the site should help illuminate the period just before the mass extinction that allowed the dinosaurs to take over the Earth, Irmis says. The fossils also illuminate exactly what was living in the vast sand box that filled what is now the Western USA, where fossils from the Late Triassic are scarce.

When a pair of scientists set out to search for fossils in the ancient desert known as "The Sandpit," their expectations were low.

"We were hopeful we could find one locality with, maybe, one specimen in it," says George Engelman of the University of Nebraska-Omaha, who along with Chure discovered the site.

In 2008, after two years of searching, the researchers stepped onto a piece of land in northern Utah that was thickly littered with old bones, and "everything since then has been one amazing discovery after another," Chure says.

The site holds more than 11,000 fossils in an area as big as a good-sized living room, says Brigham Young University's Brooks Britt, who is analyzing fossils from the site. Eons ago, the site was a shallow lake, probably fringed with plants such as ferns until a cataclysmic drought finished off the lake and its denizens alike. The result was a Late Triassic time capsule that preserves not only the usual big guys but also the small fry that seldom survive in the fossil record.

There are drepanosaurs, an extremely rare reptile with "hands" like a mole's — animals never suspected of living in deserts. There are creatures like long-legged crocodiles that must've been swift runners. There are two kinds of lizard-like sphenodonts. There are the bones of a small dinosaur and the teeth of a big one.

Soaring above them all was a pterosaur, which is not a dinosaur but a flying reptile usually found in ancient seas.

A giant pterosaur catches a sphenosuchian in this artist's conception. The creatures lived near an oasis in what became Utah.

"Everything ... has been one amazing discovery after another."

Dan Chure, Dinosaur National Monument

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Meanwhile, Around the Globe

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