



Self-determination in Switzerland

Self-determination is a fundamental aspect of Switzerland's political system of direct democracy and federalism. Direct democracy and the system of referenda and initiatives give Swiss citizens a big say in matters of state because these instruments empower voters to decide on the laws drafted by their legislative bodies. For example, since the Free-Trade Agreement of 1972, Swiss citizens have voted on all major issues concerning Switzerland's relations with the EU. In addition, voters can, by means of the popular initiative, take a proactive stance and propose amendments.

Switzerland's traditional reserve towards supranational organisations is also rooted in its self-determination and explains to a large extent why Switzerland is not a member of the EU or NATO.

Swiss federalism is committed to the notion of subsidiarity, which means that decisions are made at the lowest appropriate level. In this respect the Swiss cantons and municipalities are very powerful in comparison to the nation state— which is rare from an international perspective. For example, in Switzerland, the cantons and municipalities have an essential say and decision-making powers in matters concerning the education, social welfare and road systems.

Inseparable from the principle of self-determination in Switzerland is the notion of individual responsibility. One result of this is the relatively low proportion of government activity in GDP. In particular, voters determine themselves how much tax they will pay by setting the basic tax rate at the local and cantonal levels. And to some degree, citizens are themselves also responsible for meeting their individual needs with regard to old-age pensions and health insurance, to mention just two examples.

The significance of self-determination and individual responsibility is also seen in the high value Swiss people place on respect for the private sphere. The state refrains from interfering in the private affairs of its citizens. For example, taxpayers are responsible for declaring their own taxable income and wealth. As a result of Switzerland's banking secrecy laws, the state is only entitled to gain access to information about the financial situation of individual taxpayers in very specific situations. In social matters, the importance placed on self-determination and individual responsibility are expressed, among other ways, in Switzerland's relatively liberal policy on narcotics and in its liberal regulations with regard to passive or indirect assisted suicide. The position adopted by Switzerland ensures that both the human being's right to life and the will of the individual are respected.

Self-determination is also an important factor in the field of science and research. The private economy finances a major part of the research and development activities carried out in Switzerland. Government support for research is provided through the Swiss National Science Foundation which ensures self-determination for the scientific community. This situation implicitly acknowledges that political considerations can only play a limited role in scientific activity and that, in many ways, science must be allowed autonomy in determining its future.

