

## Citizens' rights at the federal level – an overview

Article written by the Initiative & Referendum Institute Europe (IRI Europe)

Probably no other country in the world has such extensive rights of political co-determination as Switzerland. Swiss citizens enjoy the following political rights at the federal (national) level:

### 1) Voting in elections

Active voting right  
Elections to the National Council

Passive voting right  
Eligibility to be elected to the National Council, the government and the Federal Court

All adult Swiss citizens who have reached the age of 18 are entitled to elect representatives themselves to the National Council.

All adult Swiss citizens who have reached the age of 18 are entitled to put up for election.

### 2) Voting in referendums (general voting rights)

All Swiss citizens, whether living at home or abroad, who have reached the age of 18 and who are not disqualified on grounds of mental illness or mental handicap are entitled to vote. The term 'Stimmrecht' ('the right to vote') means the right to take part – literally to 'have a say' – in citizens' referendum ballots. However, the term is also understood more widely to mean the right to take up one's political rights or to exercise one's citizens' rights. The right to vote includes the right to take part in elections and referendums, to sign referendum demands and citizens' initiatives and to exercise other democratic rights.

### 3) The right of initiative

At the federal level, Swiss citizens can demand a referendum on a change which they wish to have made to the constitution. Before an initiative can be officially recognised and launched, the signatures of 100,000 citizens who are entitled to vote have to be gathered within 18 months. An initiative can be formulated as a general proposal or be presented as a fully worked-out text.

### 4) The right to referendum

'The people' (i.e. all those with the right to vote) has the right to decide in retrospect on decisions made by parliament. Federal laws, federal decrees, open-ended international treaties and treaties which provide for accession to international organisations are subject to the facultative i.e. optional referendum. This means that if 50,000 citizens request it (by giving their signatures), the matter must be referred to a referendum. The signatures must be handed in to the authorities within 100 days of the official publication of the parliamentary decision. (All amendments to the constitution and accession to certain international organisations are subject to the obligatory referendum i.e. a referendum ballot must take place).

### 5) The right of petition

All persons of sound mind – not only those who have the right to vote – are entitled to direct written requests, proposals and complaints to the authorities. The latter must take note of such petitions. The authorities are not bound to respond, but in practice, all petitions are dealt with and responses given. Any activity of the state can be the subject of a petition.