

## **Adapting Swiss policies to needs of S'pore**

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Switzerland has long served as a model for Singapore. In 1984, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong promised that Singaporeans would achieve a "Swiss standard of living" by 1999. Indeed, the similarities between both countries have inspired Singapore to see Switzerland as a model of how to grow the economy and develop a world-class workforce.

Both countries are small, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic, with one of the highest percentages of foreign inhabitants of any country in the world. They are resource-poor, and have had to rely on ingenuity, talent and constant reinvention to remain at the top of their game.

Yet there are also pronounced differences between them and they have adopted different approaches to policymaking. To maximise space and scarce resources, Singapore has relied on a large degree of top-down central planning. Political power in Switzerland, on the other hand, rises bottom up through local communities and the cantons; the writ of federal government is relatively restricted.

Through referendums, citizens may challenge any law voted by federal Parliament and, through a federal popular initiative, introduce amendments to the federal Constitution. Eleven referendums were held last year, on issues ranging from spatial planning to executive pay and petrol kiosk opening hours. Singapore's top-down solutions display the visionary foresight of government policymakers and help ensure predictability and long-term planning. But in recent times, the consensus among policymakers has not translated to consensus between the political leadership and the citizenry. One way to address this would be to learn from the Swiss and devolve some decision-making to the people.

Direct democracy, as practised in Switzerland, has a triple function. First, it educates citizens on policy debates and endows them with the responsibility to choose. Second, it aggregates and clarifies citizen preferences. Third, it legitimises these preferences by holding policymakers accountable to whatever the citizenry has decided, thereby building trust between government and citizens.

In Switzerland, the concept of "national interest" cannot be separated from that of the "popular will", while in Singapore, the constant refrain has been that the "government knows best". There are obvious downsides to the Swiss method of governing by plebiscite. They include creating unpredictability in policymaking, weakening legal and political institutions and not protecting the rights of minorities. But the argument is not that Singapore should replicate it. Rather, it could study aspects of the system that can improve the government-citizen engagement process in the Singapore context.

Even if Swiss-style direct democracy is not immediately feasible for Singapore, it offers at least three important policy insights into how citizen preferences can inform policymaking. Both citizens and government have a part to play in this respect.

First, citizens have to rise to the challenge that the philosopher Plato once posed. They need to be deeply and thoroughly informed to play their role as co-leaders in a democracy.

In Switzerland, citizens receive a booklet two months before a referendum is to take place, informing them about the proposed changes in the law and the respective positions of the federal council and the proponents of each referendum. This allows Swiss voters to weigh different policy options and to form an opinion on the issues.

In Singapore, the Government could present citizens with a range of policy options on important issues and explain why a particular solution was eventually chosen or even considered to reach a decision. Through both print and social media, government representatives could explain the options before them and how the best solution was, or has to be, chosen.

The second insight is the importance of systematically gathering data on citizen preferences. In Switzerland, this objective is achieved through regular plebiscites. In Singapore, it could be achieved through regular polling. Although not binding on policymakers, polls can help inform the policy formulation process by providing a snapshot of public sentiment. Perhaps there is a need for a Singaporean "Gallup" or Pew Institute that makes its findings public. Such a polling institute, specialising in gathering data, tracking and analysing trends in public opinion, could help both policymakers and researchers bring policy formulation closer to the people and build a working consensus on policy issues.

The third lesson to be learnt from the Swiss concerns the use of deliberative democracy processes at the local level. In Switzerland, every village, town or city has an assembly where citizens can present oral or written proposals which are then voted on. In Singapore, such processes at the local level could be introduced by local community leaders, civic activists, and think-tanks. They could work with citizens to make policy decisions concerning their immediate living environment, such as local park spaces, transport solutions, or community facilities.

This is certainly one area in which the input of residents could complement that of policymakers. But Singaporeans would also have to step up to the plate. Such involvement takes time, discipline and a willingness to go beyond narrow self-interest.

Through the three policy innovations described above, policymakers in Singapore can achieve the positive outcomes without giving up their decision-making authority. Information transparency, regular polling, and deliberative democracy are all instruments that help facilitate the open discussion of policy issues. By making citizen preferences and government decision-making processes clear to both parties, mutual trust between government and citizenry can be developed. This, ultimately, is the most important lesson that Singapore can learn from Switzerland: how to integrate citizen preferences and insights into policymaking while still maintaining a long-term vision and strategy that best suits the local context.

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