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Le 11 mars 2012 en Suisse : limiter les résidences secondaires, les enjeux d'une votation

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Foreword

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Foreword

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 The political culture of Switzerland has two particularly original features that sometimes combine in a surprising way. Firstly, Swiss citizens are allowed to vote on legal and constitutional modifications provided that there are a sufficient number of them to request such a vote. Proposed changes must also meet with certain formal requirements and, most importantly, comply with international law. Secondly, for more than a century, national imagination has attributed special importance to mountain regions, landscapes and their people: the Alps have been seen as the mythical locus of the nation, a shrine for symbolic landscapes, as well as an environment where individuals can experience nature and history. Thus, based on these two rather special aspects of Swiss culture, it sometimes happens that the country's citizens exercise their democratic right to a popular vote in order to cultivate their very specific relationship with the mountains.
- 2 This has happened twice over the last two decades. In 1994, the Swiss people voted in favour of an initiative that forced federal institutions to commission two new, very costly railways through the Alps in order to limit transalpine road traffic. Then, on 11 March 2012, the Swiss people voted, with a small majority, to restrict the number of second homes in each Swiss municipality to 20% of total housing stock. This second initiative is not specifically targeted at alpine municipalities, but only municipalities located in the Alps, and a few in the Jura, exceed the maximum rate (20%) mentioned in the initiative. In many of them, second homes already account for more than 60%, and even as much as 80%, of total housing stock. Therefore, it was clear for most observers that the initiative was aimed at protecting Alpine landscapes from over urbanization and limiting the proportion of residences that are only occupied by tourists from time to time. The initiative was promoted by the Franz Weber Foundation, Franz Weber

being a former journalist who has become a high-profile environmental activist for the past four decades.

- 3 In 2012, as in 1994, the Swiss people sent a clear message to the Federal institutions, as well as to residents of the Alps, that it felt deeply concerned by what was happening in the Alps and what the future held in store. It also reminded neighbouring states and their citizens, who have at times been envious, or suspicious, of this aspect of Swiss democracy, that the Swiss possess a unique tool and facility to decide on the fate of their mountains.
- 4 However, the vote of 11 March taught us more than that. Although some observers likened the result to a political earthquake, it was not because Federal institutions had been dictated to by the people. This happens regularly. Nor was it because the Swiss people demonstrated how deeply they were attached to their mountains. This can be witnessed on almost any Sunday in the year. The shock came more from the fact that the Swiss people had granted themselves the power to decide on something that is usually decided on by municipalities and cantons. Since 1979, every canton has had to prepare its own master plan – the “*plan directeur cantonal*” – for future construction, infrastructure development and land use. In most Swiss cantons, the precise rules for construction are defined at the municipal level. In other words, the multiplication of second homes over recent decades in the Swiss Alps, and more specifically in Valais, has been made possible by local and cantonal policies intent on giving landowners the opportunity to make money from their property and providing construction companies with a lucrative market.
- 5 The 11 March 2012 vote questioned this economic and social model and, more importantly, it also questioned local and cantonal autonomy in deciding on public regulations for planning and building, which were, for some, at the very core of the Federal spirit.
- 6 Since March 2012, a number of decisions have been taken. The Federal Office for Regional Planning invited a working group to translate the very simple text of the initiative into a Federal “*ordonnance*” or ruling. This 2-page document provides a precise definition of the conditions and requirements of the enforcement of a democratic decision. This *ordonnance* was validated by the Swiss government last summer and will come into force on the first day of January 2013. The Federal Parliament will have to legislate on this issue by the end of 2014.
- 7 The papers in this special issue were written by researchers in the days and weeks following the vote. All of them understood that this vote could provide valuable insights into alpine issues and Swiss democracy. Pierre Dessemontet and Martin Schuler provide a detailed analysis of the results of the vote, an analysis which does not reveal the so-called “divorce between the Alps and the cities” that the media drew attention to in the aftermath of the vote. Mathieu Petite analyses the reasons behind the results. Bernard Debarbieux’s paper, which was reprinted for a Swiss daily newspaper, questions the capacity of the Swiss people to turn the Alpine landscape into a national common good.
- 8 Since the JAR intends to keep this special issue open to further debate and complementary academic and non-academic analyses, other papers may be added in the future. In doing so, the JAR hopes to provide a platform for both scientific and

political exchange and discussion, where authors can draw on their academic expertise as well as civic commitment.

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