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Suppose they gave an election and someone went!

We are the people.

Federal elections, which take place every four years, are the highlight of the Swiss political calendar. And yet turnout remains modest compared to other countries. By Rolf Ribi

Article 148 of the Swiss Federal Constitution reads, "Subject to the rights of the People and the Cantons, the Federal Parliament is the highest authority of the Confederation." The Federal Parliament consists of the 200 members of the National Council and the 46 cantonal representatives on the Council of States. On 21 October, the Swiss people at home and abroad will elect the members of the National Council, in other words, the lower house. This election, the highlight of Swiss political life, takes place every four years.

However, there are few signs that this summer's campaigning will be emotionally charged. Even so, the political parties are ready to tour the country rallying voters, and have already earmarked CHF 1.5-2 million each for this purpose. Remarkably, their campaigns all use images and slogans that evoke patriotic sentiments. The Social Democrats' logo features the Matterhorn, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) is campaigning under the slogan "My home, our Switzerland", the Free Democrats have a three-dimensional Swiss cross on their Web site, while a new white cross on the Christian Democrats' party logo is designed to attest to their "Swiss" credentials. The SVP has gone to the greatest lengths to appear patriotic, with a billy goat called Zottel who is to make an appearance at all its election rallies.

Even if the campaigning does liven up in the autumn, one thing is certain: elections arouse less interest in direct democracies like Switzerland than in representative (parliamentary) democracies like France, for example. Turnout at the 2003 elections was just 45.2 percent, the third-lowest figure since the

introduction of proportional representation in 1919.

There are several reasons for this poor turnout in comparison with other countries. If you are regularly involved in the decision-making process through referenda, elections are not of central importance. By contrast, in countries like France the ballot box is virtually the only place where people can express their political sentiments. In addition, the elections within the Swiss consociational system do not lead to a complete change of government. Instead, the balance of power between left and right and between individual parties usually shifts only marginally.

Co-determination through voting

And yet there are good reasons to become actively involved in elections – indeed very good reasons.

Firstly, if you don't bother voting, you leave the task of shaping the future to others (including your political opponents). Secondly, nearly all parliamentary decisions are taken within the confines of the Federal Parliament building and are not put to the people. It is the elected MPs who make most of the decisions and determine how bills are to be presented to the electorate – and often enough whether they should be put to a public vote.

The third point is that it is the men and women elected to the Federal Parliament who choose the Federal Council every four years. So it is the parliament elected by the Swiss people themselves that determines whether we have a national government with a conservative or centre-right majority, as is currently the case, or whether the Federal Council of the next legislative period is more

balanced, more socially-minded, more environmentally conscious and more cosmopolitan than the present one.

Four years ago, the Federal Office of Statistics looked into which socioeconomic groups were more or less likely to vote. Its findings were clear: "Men, older people and those with a higher level of education and greater incomes vote more often than women, young people, the less well-educated and those with low incomes." This imbalance in participation by the various groups led to a "systematic distortion" of the will of the people that was undesirable from a national political point of view, it said.

After the federal elections of 2003, voters were asked why they had cast their vote. Thirty-nine percent gave "political co-determination" as the most important reason. Next up, at 18 percent, was "tradition, habit and civic duty", although this argument in particular is losing ground. "To support a particular party or candidate" (13%) was seen as less important, though slightly more so than "political interest" (11%). Interestingly enough, the motivation differed between the various language groups. Whereas a clear majority of voters in German-speaking Switzerland stated "political co-determination" as their main reason for voting, voters in the "Latin" regions had a very different priority. In French-speaking and Italian-speaking areas, "awareness of traditions and civic duty" was the most important motive.

"State authority rests with the people", the constitution of Zurich canton asserts concisely. And so it does. We are the people, and our electoral behaviour plays a decisive role in shaping our country's future.