THE ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN SWITZERLANDS CLIMATE POLICIES: GOVERNANCE INITIATIVES AND RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

V. Sneha

Student,
Amity Institute of Social Sciences,
Amity University,
Noida (Uttar Pradesh, India)

ABSTRACT:

Switzerland, renowned for its robust democratic institutions and longstanding environmental stewardship, presents a compelling case for analyzing the role of democratic governance in shaping effective and enduring climate policy. This paper explores how Switzerland's participatory democratic structures, decentralized federalist system, and well-developed institutional frameworks contribute to its comprehensive climate policy formulation and multilayered resilience strategies. Drawing on legislative initiatives, national and cantonal referenda, international environmental commitments, and a deeply rooted tradition of cantonal autonomy, the study evaluates how these democratic mechanisms ensure policy legitimacy, extensive public engagement, and adaptive governance frameworks. The research also delves into Switzerland's key resilience strategies addressing climate change adaptation and mitigation, while highlighting the synergistic relationship between inclusive democratic decision-making and sustainable environmental outcomes. The Swiss case provides important insights for other democracies aiming to balance environmental urgency with democratic principles.

Keywords: Switzerland, Climate Policy, Democratic Institutions, Governance, Resilience, Federalism, Public Participation, Environmental Governance, Direct Democracy, Adaptation, Mitigation

1. INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY SWITZERLAND'S CLIMATE DEMOCRACY ?

This paper examines how Switzerland's democratic system influences the development and implementation of climate policies, showing that democracy can serve as both a support and an obstacle in addressing climate change. It focuses on how Swiss institutions collaborate with scientific input, public views, and local authorities to create effective strategies and strengthen resilience to climate-related challenges.

Switzerland is also a federal country, which means that power is shared between the national government and smaller units called cantons. Each canton has its own rules and decisions about the environment. This system allows local governments to take action that fits their specific needs, such as protecting their forests, managing water supplies, or building renewable energy sources like solar and wind. Over the years, Switzerland has created many strong climate laws and policies. These include the CO_2 Act, the Energy Strategy 2050, and the National Adaptation Strategy[1]. But what makes these efforts special is how they were shaped—not just by experts and politicians, but also by ordinary citizens through votes, public debates, and participation. This approach makes climate policy stronger because it's based on public support and shared responsibility.

Switzerland's case is useful not only for environmental scholars, but also for any country trying to balance climate urgency with democratic values. It shows how democratic systems, if used well, can help build trust and make climate policy more stable and long-lasting. At the same time, it also shows some of the limits of democracy—for example, when urgent action is blocked by public resistance in referendums.[2]

2. HOW DOES SWITZERLAND'S GOVERNMENT WORK?

Switzerland is known worldwide for having one of the most democratic and participatory political systems. The government is built on three strong pillars: federalism, direct democracy, and power-sharing among political parties. These three features are very important in shaping how climate laws are made and how people are involved in the process.

1. Federalism – Power Shared Between Levels:

Switzerland operates as a federal state, meaning authority is shared between the national government (the Confederation) and 26 individual cantonal governments. These cantons function like mini-states, each with its own constitution, legislature, and autonomy over key areas such as education, transportation, energy, and aspects of climate policy.[3] This structure enables tailored responses to regional climate challenges—for instance, mountain regions may emphasize glacier preservation and avalanche prevention, while urban cantons might focus on cutting vehicle emissions and enhancing public transit. Additionally, cantons can pilot innovative climate initiatives that, if successful, can be adopted across the country.

2. Direct Democracy – Citizens Have a Strong Voice:

One of the most unique features of Switzerland's political system is direct democracy. This gives Swiss citizens more power than in most other countries. People can vote not just in regular elections, but also on specific laws and policy changes, including environmental and climate policies. There are three main tools of direct democracy in Switzerland:

- Referendum:	If enough people sign a petition, they can request a national vote to approve or reject a law passed by Parliament.
- Popular Initiative:	Citizens can propose a new law or a change to the Constitution. If 100,000 signatures are collected, the proposal goes to a national vote.
-Obligatory Referendum:	Some changes, like constitutional amendments, automatically go to a public vote.

For example, in 2021, a revised version of the CO_2 Act, which was meant to increase climate protection measures, was rejected by public vote. Many people feared it would raise living costs, even though the law was meant to fight climate change. This event showed the power and responsibility of citizens in shaping climate action.

3. Consensus Politics – Working Together Across Parties:

Switzerland follows a power-sharing model known as consensus democracy. This means that all major political parties are involved in decision-making, and compromise and cooperation are key values in Parliament. Instead of having one ruling party, Switzerland's Federal Council (the executive branch) is made up of seven members from different parties, and they make decisions together. This cooperative style helps ensure that climate policies are not easily reversed when a new government comes to power. It also means that most laws—including environmental ones—are discussed and agreed upon by many political perspectives, making them more stable and widely accepted.

4. Strong Institutions and Civil Society:

In Switzerland, democratic institutions such as parliamentary committees, local councils, and independent agencies work closely with civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to shape climate policies. [4] This inclusive system ensures that scientists, environmental groups, farmers, industry, and ordinary people all have a say.

Conclusion of the Section:

Switzerland's political system, built on federalism, direct democracy, and consensus governance, plays a big role in its climate efforts. By involving many voices—citizens, cantons, scientists, and political parties—it ensures that climate policies are fair, widely supported, and well adapted to local needs. Although this can sometimes slow down the process, it builds public trust, policy stability, and long-term success in climate governance.

3. HOW SWITZERLAND'S CLIMATE LAWS HAVE CHANGED OVER TIME (EVOLUTION OF CLIMATE POLICY IN SWITZERLAND)

Switzerland has steadily adjusted and strengthened its climate laws over the years. These changes reflect both the environmental demands of the country and its democratic processes, where

laws are shaped through public involvement, government planning, and international cooperation.

The process began in the late 1990s when Switzerland became a part of the Kyoto Protocol, a global agreement aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Inresponse, Switzerland introduced the CO_2 Act in 2000, which was one of the country's first significant climate laws.[5] This act set targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions and introduced a carbon tax to promote cleaner energy. It was an important first step for a small country aiming to lead by example.As the urgency to act on climate change increased, Switzerland decided to strengthen its approach. In 2011, the CO_2 Act was revised to include tougher regulations and additional financial incentives. The revisions made the carbon tax stricter and supported efforts to improve energy efficiency across various sectors like transportation and construction[6]. These changes helped move Switzerland closer to its goal of reducing emissions while also promoting innovation in sustainable technologies.

Following the Paris Agreement in 2015, Switzerland raised its climate ambitions. The country pledged to cut emissions by 50% by 2030 and reach net-zero emissions by 2050. To achieve these targets, the government outlined a long-term climate strategy focusing on transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources such as wind and solar [7]. The strategy also prioritized electric vehicles, energy-efficient buildings, and sustainable agriculture practices.However, some efforts encountered challenges. A proposed update to the CO_2 Act in 2021 sought to introduce new taxes on carbon-heavy activities like air travel and fuel use, aiming to meet the Paris climate targets. Yet, when put to a public referendum, the law was rejected. Many citizens felt it would place an unfair burden on them, particularly those living in rural areas where reliance on cars and heating fuels is higher. This situation highlighted the unique aspect of Swiss democracy, where significant laws often go to the public for approval. It also demonstrated that climate policies need to address social fairness in order to gain broad support.

Undeterred by the setback, the government revised the law, placing greater emphasis on innovation and fairness. In 2023, the Climate and Innovation Act was introduced, which encouraged clean energy initiatives, supported green businesses, and ensured that vulnerable communities would not be left behind. This time, the law was accepted by the public, showing that adapting to past experiences and responding to people's concerns can lead to stronger, more widely supported policies.

4. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DEMOCRATIC CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

Switzerland's democratic political system has a strong influence on how it creates and applies climate policies. While it encourages citizen participation and transparency, it also brings some unique difficulties. At the same time, this democratic setup offers key advantages, especially when it comes to building support and long-term commitment to climate goals.

1. The Struggles of Moving Quickly in a Democracy:

One of the main problems Switzerland faces is that decisions take time. In a direct democracy like Switzerland, major laws often need to be voted on by the public. This helps ensure fairness and public trust but can cause delays in urgent matters like climate change. For example, in 2021, voters turned down a revised CO_2 law, mainly because they were worried it would raise fuel prices and hurt lower-income people[8]. Even though the law would have helped reduce emissions, public resistance forced the government to go back and revise the policy Still, this situation also shows how the Swiss government listens and adapts. After the rejection, officials worked to understand public concerns and later passed the Climate and Innovation Act in 2023. This process shows that democratic systems can still move forward by learning from setbacks and improving policies with broader support.

Another issue comes from Switzerland's federal system, where each canton (or state) has its own powers. This allows local governments to create climate plans suited to their own regions. However, not all cantons move at the same pace, which leads to gaps in how climate rules are applied. While some cantons lead in clean energy and public transport, others lag behind due to political or financial reasons. This creates an uneven approach to climate policy, although it also allows cantons to share successful methods with each other through national cooperation.

Economic concerns are another challenge. Some industries and communities fear that new environmental rules might increase costs or threaten jobs. Businesses in sectors like transport, farming, and construction often push back against climate laws, especially if they include new taxes or restrictions. In rural areas, people might also feel that their voices are not being heard, especially if climate actions affect their daily life. These concerns need to be addressed through fair transition measures, such as financial support for switching to green jobs and cleaner energy options.

2. Chances for Meaningful Progress:

Even with these challenges, Swiss democracy also provides strong advantages. One of the biggest is that the public and civil society plays a major role. Environmental organizations such as WWF Switzerland, Greenpeace, and Pro Natura regularly engage with the government and the public to spread awareness and push for stronger climate actions. Their involvement helps make sure people stay informed and motivated to support climate-friendly policies Another strength is Switzerland's excellent education and research system. Universities like ETH Zurich and the University of Lausanne provide scientific studies and policy suggestions[10] that help the government make better decisions. Their work is especially important in areas like renewable energy planning, climate risk analysis, and emissions tracking

Finally, democracy provides long-term stability. Since Swiss climate laws are carefully discussed and approved by both citizens and government, they are more likely to last. This

consistency is important for dealing with long-term issues like global warming, which require years of steady action.

5. CLIMATE RESILIENCE STRATEGIES IN SWITZERLAND:

Switzerland, with its diverse landscapes and sophisticated infrastructure, has implemented robust strategies to ensure resilience to the challenges posed by climate change. These strategies focus on reducing the risks associated with extreme weather events, shifting agricultural patterns, and the growing pressures on water resources. The country's response to climate resilience is tightly linked to its democratic institutions, as participatory governance helps ensure that policies are socially inclusive, transparent, and adaptable to changing needs. The National Adaptation Strategy (NAS), introduced in 2012, forms the backbone of Switzerland's climate resilience planning. This strategy focuses on addressing sectors that are most vulnerable to climate impacts. Among these, water resource management is crucial, as the country is facing challenges related to changing precipitation patterns and the retreat of glaciers. Switzerland's emphasis on managing water resources efficiently—through infrastructure improvements and better coordination between cantonal and federal governments—has been key to maintaining water security[11].

Agriculture is another crucial sector impacted by climate change. As temperature and precipitation patterns shift, Swiss agriculture must adjust to maintain food security and support rural economies. Efforts focus on encouraging climate-resilient farming methods, such as diversifying crops and conserving soil, as well as promoting forestry management practices that help counteract droughts and changing weather. Urban resilience also plays a key role in Switzerland's strategy. Cities like Zurich and Geneva have taken proactive steps towards sustainable urban planning, incorporating green infrastructure, such as urban green spaces and energy-efficient buildings, to combat heat islands and enhance air quality. Additionally, public transportation networks are being expanded to lower carbon emissions and improve mobility within cities.

Switzerland's federal structure allows for regional flexibility in adapting to climate change. Cantons, the individual states within the Swiss Confederation, can tailor their climate strategies based on local conditions, fostering bottom-up innovation. This decentralization allows for specific measures that address regional needs, such as the protection of alpine regions from the impacts of climate change or strategies aimed at protecting tourism in mountain areas. One of the key strengths of Switzerland's resilience strategy is the active involvement of civil society. The country's system of direct democracy allows citizens to participate in decision-making through referenda and public consultations. Environmental organizations such as WWF Switzerland and Pro Natura play a critical role in advocating for robust climate policies, conducting research, and mobilizing public support.[12] Their involvement ensures that policies are not only scientifically sound but also socially equitable.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. The financial cost of large-scale adaptation projects

is substantial, and inter-regional cooperation must continue to ensure consistency across the country. Moreover, the ongoing uncertainty surrounding future climate impacts requires continuous adaptation and flexibility in policy-making.

6. CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES OF SWITZERLAND'S CLIMATE GOVERNANCE:

Switzerland's democratic approach to climate governance, while effective in many ways, faces several significant challenges that impact the speed and effectiveness of policy implementation. One key issue is the delayed implementation of climate policies, as Switzerland's system of direct democracy, which includes referenda and popular initiatives, often slows down the process[13]. While public participation is important, this can hinder quick action, particularly in times of urgent climate crises. For example, the rejection of the CO2 Act in a 2021 referendum delayed necessary legislative changes, which could impede the achievement of climate goals.

Another challenge stems from Switzerland's decentralized federal system. With 26 cantons that have considerable autonomy, there is often a lack of uniformity in how climate policies are implemented. Wealthier and more urban cantons can afford to pursue ambitious sustainability measures, while rural cantons may struggle to implement effective climate strategies. This leads to inequalities in how different regions adapt to climate change and its impacts. The referendum system also poses risks, as policies critical to climate action can be overturned due to public resistance, often driven by economic concerns. For instance, the rejection of climate laws, like the 2021 CO2 Act, was partly due to fears over economic costs. This highlights the tension between economic interests and the need for stringent climate policies, as industries resistant to change argue that such policies can harm their competitiveness.[14]

7. LESSONS FOR OTHER COUNTRIES AND GLOBAL IMPACT:

Switzerland's way of handling climate policy through democratic means shows how a country can combine public participation with environmental responsibility. While its system is unique to its culture and history, some features—like involving citizens in decisions, encouraging cooperation between local and national levels, and using expert advice—can be useful for other countries too.One of the most important lessons from Switzerland is that strong climate policies don't have to be forced from the top. Instead, involving people in shaping those policies through open discussion and voting can lead to better acceptance and longer-lasting solutions. This approach helps build public trust and avoids sudden policy changes when governments shift.

Also, Switzerland's actions prove that even smaller nations can have a big influence on the global stage[16]. By sticking to international agreements like the Paris Agreement, and by being active in the United Nations climate talks, Switzerland sets an example of how democratic systems can lead global efforts for sustainability.Though every country has different systems, adopting Switzerland's

focus on fairness, cooperation, and transparency can help others build stronger, more accepted climate strategies.

8. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS:

Switzerland's democratic approach to climate policy not only provides important lessons for other democracies but also offers valuable insights for international climate governance. The Swiss model of balancing democratic participation with the urgency of climate action stands as a testament to the potential for harmonizing environmental sustainability with the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and public engagement. This section explores how Switzerland's democratic climate governance model can serve as a reference for other countries, especially those grappling with the challenges of climate change in democratic systems.

1. Lessons for Other Democracies:

Switzerland's commitment to integrating public participation in environmental decision-making has produced several key lessons for other democratic countries seeking to navigate the complexities of climate action while upholding democratic values. These lessons include:

- **Public Involvement Through Referenda and Initiatives:** The Swiss model of direct democracy, where citizens have the power to propose and challenge laws through referenda and popular initiatives, ensures that climate policies reflect the will of the people. This process fosters greater public engagement and can help increase the legitimacy of climate policies. For example, Switzerland's approach to modifying the CO2 Act and the debate surrounding the Energy Strategy 2050 highlights the country's ability to ensure that national policies align with public sentiment. Other democracies could learn from this participatory process by incorporating more avenues for citizen involvement in climate policy development.

- **Decentralized Governance and Local Adaptation:** Switzerland's highly decentralized system, where cantons have significant autonomy in areas such as environmental policy, allows for more tailored, region- specific climate actions[18]. This flexibility enables local governments to address unique climate risks, which is particularly important in large and diverse countries. Other countries with decentralized governance systems, such as Canada and the United States, could benefit from adopting a similar approach by allowing regional governments to take the lead in climate adaptation and mitigation strategies while maintaining overall national targets.

- **Intergovernmental Coordination and Collaboration:** The Swiss federal system is built on collaboration between cantonal, municipal, and federal governments. This coordination is essential for ensuring that climate policies are not only effective but also equitable across regions. The Swiss experience shows how intergovernmental bodies, such as the **Conference of Cantonal Governments, play a key role in aligning policy objectives across different levels of government. Other countries with federal systems, including Australia

an d Germany , coul d enhanc e thei r climat e governanc e b y strengthenin g intergovernmental communication and cooperation to reduce policy fragmentation.

- **Civil Society and NGO Participation:** Switzerland's robust civil society and the active participation of environmental organizations in shaping policy provide another key lesson for other democracies. NGOs and advocacy groups like WWF Switzerland and Greenpeace play an essential role in raising awareness, providing expertise, and pushing for stronger climate action [19]. Countries with active civil societies can strengthen their climate policies by involving these groups in the policy-making process, ensuring that diverse viewpoints are represented and that there is greater public buy-in for environmental measures.

2. **International Climate Leadership:**

Beyond its domestic policies, Switzerland has also positioned itself as a leader in international climate governance. The country's commitment to global climate agreements, such as the Paris Agreement, underscores its dedication to addressing climate change at both national and international levels. Switzerland's participation in international organizations like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has enabled it to influence global climate policy and advocate for ambitious global targets.

The Swiss example offers valuable insights into how smaller countries can exert significant influence in international climate negotiations. By aligning domestic policies with global climate goals, Switzerland demonstrates that even small democracies can play a vital role in shaping international climate policies. Countries facing challenges in balancing national interests with global obligations could draw inspiration from Switzerland's approach to climate diplomacy, which emphasizes both national action and international cooperation.

3. **Global Relevance of the Swiss Model:**

Switzerland's model of democratic climate governance offers relevant lessons for both large and small democracies worldwide. As climate change becomes an increasingly urgent issue, the importance of public participation, decentralized governance, and civil society engagement grows. The Swiss approach demonstrates that democracy and effective climate action can go hand in hand. By ensuring that citizens have a voice in climate policies, involving local governments in policy formulation, and encouraging cross- sectoral collaboration, Switzerland has created a system that is adaptable, resilient, and responsive to climate change.

Other countries facing climate challenges can benefit from adopting similar strategies, particularly in regions where public trust in government is crucial for the success of environmental policies. Switzerland's model can inspire a more inclusive and transparent approach to climate governance, ensuring that citizens are not only affected by policies but are also active participants in shaping their implementation.

4.   Conclusion: A Blueprint for the Future:

The Swiss example provides a robust blueprint for integrating democratic values into climate governance. By ensuring broad public participation, promoting decentralized decision-making, and fostering cross- sectoral cooperation, Switzerland has demonstrated that effective climate policies can be both ambitious and socially acceptable. Other democratic nations, whether large or small, can learn from this approach to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable climate policies that address both national and global challenges.

9.   FINAL THOUGHTS AND FUTURE OUTLOOK :

Switzerland's democratic approach to climate governance offers a compelling example of how democratic institutions can effectively address the challenges of climate change. The combination of direct democracy, federalism, and participatory decision-making ensures that climate policies are not only grounded in scientific evidence but also reflect the collective will and needs of the Swiss people. The strength of this model lies in its capacity to involve citizens directly in policy development, fostering greater public support and ensuring long-term commitment to climate goals.

However, despite the many advantages, challenges persist that must be addressed for continued success. The referendum process, which is central to Switzerland's democracy, can sometimes delay necessary climate actions, especially when quick responses are crucial. Additionally, disparities between regions and the potential for policy reversals through public votes highlight the delicate balance between democratic participation and the need for urgent climate measures.

Looking forward, Switzerland's experience offers valuable insights for other countries facing similar issues. The participatory governance model it has developed could provide a useful framework for other democratic nations seeking to reconcile the urgency of climate change with the principle of public involvement. As the world progresses toward more ambitious climate goals outlined in agreements like the Paris Agreement, the need for transparent, inclusive governance will become increasingly important.

Switzerland's future climate policy appears promising, especially as the country remains committed to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 and continues to invest in renewable energy, climate resilience, and sustainable infrastructure. The country's ongoing focus on green innovation, climate justice, and climate- related finance will likely play a crucial role in shaping its long-term climate strategy.

In conclusion, while there are challenges in fully leveraging democratic institutions for climate action, Switzerland's model proves that democracy and effective climate policy can go hand in hand. By enhancing citizen participation, strengthening institutional coordination, and refining climate policies, Switzerland can continue to set an example for the world, contributing to the global

fight against climate change while maintaining a democratic framework.

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