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Victory for the government

As the government had hoped, Swiss voters voted by a clear majority in favour of army and civil defence reforms and rejected seven people's initiatives.

PABLO CRIVELLI

AT THE END OF THE MARATHON referendum vote on Sunday 18 May, the government had an additional reason for celebration: whereas a mere 28 percent of voters turned out for the referendum vote on 9 February 2003, this time almost half of the electorate (48.3 percent) exercised their voting rights and proved that the Swiss are far from complacent when it comes to important proposals.

The proposed army ("Army XXI") and civil defence reforms, against which the referendum was aimed, found nation-wide acceptance, with 76 percent of voters in favour of the military reform law. An even higher percentage (80.5 percent) of voters gave the thumbs-up for the law on population and civil protection. This was in line with expectations ahead of the vote, since the initiators of the referendum were only able to count on the support of minor political groups such as the Swiss Democrats. With the exception of the SP, which called for a free vote on the army reform, the three other government parties supported both reforms unconditionally. In the eyes of most voters, a smaller and more mobile army is capable of tackling modern threats. Voters failed to be impressed by opponents' claims that the Army XXI would take Switzerland one step closer to NATO.

The vote against the seven people's initiatives also comes as no surprise: of the 157 initiatives brought to ballot to date, only 13 have achieved a majority vote by the people and cantons. And this time No majorities were resounding, ranging from 58.4 percent for the "MoratoriumPlus" initiative to 72.8 percent for the health initiative launched by the unions and the Left.

So the verdict is clear, particularly in the case of the "MoratoriumPlus" and "Non-nuclear power" initiatives launched by anti-nuclear power groups, with the latter rejected by an even clearer majority (66.3 percent) than the former. As the results demonstrated, Swiss voters have no desire to do away with nuclear power either in the medium or the long term. Almost 40 percent of the energy generated in Switzerland is produced by nuclear power plants and some is exported to other countries, guaranteeing both jobs and tax revenue.

Voters also showed their disapproval of health insurance premiums indexed to income and assets: 72.8 percent rejected the "health initiative", which aimed to support families unable to afford continually rising health insurance costs. The other government parties as well as the Federal Council denounced the proposal as far too centralistic and an unsuitable solution to the problem of soaring healthcare costs.

The "Equal rights for disabled persons" initiative was accepted in the cantons of Geneva, Jura and Ticino but achieved only 37.7 percent of the Yes vote overall. Voters probably found the recently passed law, put forward as a parliamentary counter-proposal, an ethically acceptable and (perhaps more importantly) less expensive alternative.

The other initiatives ("Sunday initiative", "Yes to fair rents", "apprenticeship initiative") were rejected by between 62.3 and 68.4 of voters.

Elections on 19 October

The next issue of "Swiss Review" will be devoted to the National Council elections to be held on 19 October. We will be presenting profiles of all the candidates with a special interest and involvement in the Fifth Switzerland. The issue will also publish the results of a study of the Swiss Abroad, commissioned by the OSA and swissinfo/SRI and conducted by the GfS Research Institute. Mailing date from Berne: 21 July.

imagepress / Patrick Lüthy



Voting slogans on the cooling tower of the Gösgen-Däniken nuclear power plant. The giant poster measures 64 x 44 metres.

Resolute Swiss – at home and abroad

Swiss Abroad are amazing people: scattered throughout the world, far from any Swiss political propaganda, they nevertheless show the same voting patterns as their compatriots at home. On 18 May they allied themselves strongly with voters at home, giving two thumbs-up and seven thumbs-down.

It is dangerous to try to draw political conclusions from voting results, since only the cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Lucerne keep a central electoral roll and are therefore able to distinguish between Swiss Abroad and domestic voters. But if one were to hazard an interpretation and use the votes recorded in these three cantons to extrapolate national patterns, the trends are extremely interesting.

Firstly, the Swiss Abroad turnout is around 45 percent. Based on 82,000 registered on

the electoral roll, this means that roughly 37,000 Swiss Abroad voted. This estimate is dangerous, however, insofar as it may give the impression of a comparatively low interest in politics on the part of Swiss Abroad. Statistics show that political involvement varies widely depending on the country of residence. For instance, Swiss resident in Italy vote four times more in referenda and elections than those resident in Paraguay.

A more meaningful approach is to look at voter numbers on the basis of the canton of origin, which turns out to be roughly on a par with the statistics for domestic voters (in Vaud 42 percent Swiss Abroad voted and 44 percent of voters at home; in Geneva 45 percent Swiss Abroad voted as opposed to 51 percent at home, and in Lucerne 48 percent Swiss Abroad voted as opposed to 54 percent at home). Added to this, of the above three cantons only Geneva voted for the "Equal rights for disabled persons" initiative, and this was also the case among Genevan expatriates (2,629 Yes as opposed to 1,648 No).

On this basis, then, Swiss Abroad exhibit more regional characteristics than we realise. A Genevan is still a Genevan and a Lucerner a Lucerner, whether he lives at the foot of Mount Pilatus or Kilimanjaro.

Gabrielle Keller

COMMENTARY

Left scorned

As the only government party to recommend acceptance of all the initiatives, the Left emerges as the loser in this latest vote. The thumbs-down for the health initiative is even harder for the Left and the unions to swallow given their energetic campaign for a Yes vote. It was not so much the rejection as the chasm between supporters and opponents which proved surprising: 72.8 percent No as opposed to only 27.2 percent Yes! The initiative proposed indexing premiums for the obligatory health insurance to personal income and assets, and raising VAT to pay for healthcare costs not covered by insurance. This turned out to be the Achilles heel of the initiative. Given the dire state of federal finances, the bad economic climate and the possibility of additional salary deductions to shore up pension funds, voters decided that raising VAT (by up to five percent according to the Federal Council) was an excellent argument against the initiative. Opponents argued strongly that such a measure would affect rich and poor equally and negate any advantages which the new system could bring.

All in all, the Swiss electorate voted on 18 May with an eye on their wallet. This premise is supported by the rejection of the anti-nuclear power initiatives and the "Equal rights for disabled persons" initiative, which the Federal Council denounced as additional cost drains.

Pablo Crivelli

Results of the Federal Referenda

| Canton | Army XXI | | Civil Defence | | Yes to fair rents | | Sunday initiative | | Health initiative | | Disabled initiative | | Non-nuclear power | | Moratorium-Plus | | Apprenticeship initiative | | Turnout in % |
|--------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|---------------------------|-------------|--------------|
| | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | YES% | NO% | |
| ZH | 75.7 | 24.3 | 81.0 | 19.0 | 33.0 | 67.0 | 42.2 | 57.8 | 28.0 | 72.0 | 37.8 | 62.2 | 34.7 | 65.3 | 44.7 | 55.3 | 34.8 | 65.2 | 52.0 |
| BE | 80.4 | 19.6 | 83.9 | 16.1 | 32.8 | 67.2 | 42.0 | 58.0 | 27.4 | 72.6 | 36.7 | 63.3 | 32.5 | 67.5 | 41.4 | 58.6 | 32.5 | 67.5 | 48.2 |
| LU | 77.0 | 23.0 | 80.4 | 19.6 | 28.7 | 71.3 | 37.9 | 62.1 | 19.9 | 80.1 | 29.1 | 70.9 | 29.5 | 70.5 | 36.4 | 63.6 | 24.1 | 75.9 | 53.8 |
| UR | 63.1 | 36.9 | 67.2 | 32.8 | 25.3 | 74.7 | 36.7 | 63.3 | 21.4 | 78.6 | 31.2 | 68.8 | 35.8 | 64.2 | 41.7 | 58.3 | 24.8 | 75.2 | 48.5 |
| SZ | 60.6 | 39.4 | 66.6 | 33.4 | 20.1 | 79.9 | 33.6 | 66.4 | 16.9 | 83.1 | 28.6 | 71.4 | 26.9 | 73.1 | 33.5 | 66.5 | 22.3 | 77.7 | 55.5 |
| OW | 67.1 | 32.9 | 70.1 | 29.9 | 17.5 | 82.5 | 32.3 | 67.7 | 14.1 | 85.9 | 26.6 | 73.4 | 31.8 | 68.2 | 38.3 | 61.7 | 18.4 | 81.6 | 53.1 |
| NW | 74.1 | 25.9 | 77.4 | 22.6 | 19.2 | 80.8 | 30.8 | 69.2 | 12.9 | 87.1 | 25.9 | 74.1 | 33.2 | 66.8 | 35.8 | 64.2 | 16.1 | 83.9 | 55.6 |
| GL | 66.4 | 33.6 | 71.5 | 28.5 | 23.0 | 77.0 | 42.1 | 57.9 | 19.5 | 80.5 | 33.1 | 66.9 | 35.6 | 64.4 | 40.9 | 59.1 | 21.3 | 78.7 | 48.4 |
| ZG | 76.6 | 23.4 | 79.2 | 20.8 | 22.8 | 77.2 | 35.2 | 64.8 | 16.9 | 83.1 | 28.3 | 71.7 | 28.7 | 71.3 | 37.2 | 62.8 | 23.0 | 77.0 | 57.6 |
| FR | 81.1 | 18.9 | 83.8 | 16.2 | 37.7 | 62.3 | 33.6 | 66.4 | 30.1 | 69.9 | 46.0 | 54.0 | 33.5 | 66.5 | 41.5 | 58.5 | 33.8 | 66.2 | 47.3 |
| SO | 77.2 | 22.8 | 79.9 | 20.1 | 27.3 | 72.7 | 35.5 | 64.5 | 23.2 | 76.8 | 33.2 | 66.8 | 26.6 | 73.4 | 35.4 | 64.6 | 27.1 | 72.9 | 55.6 |
| BS | 78.1 | 21.9 | 84.0 | 16.0 | 47.7 | 52.3 | 43.6 | 56.4 | 36.6 | 63.4 | 42.2 | 57.8 | 52.1 | 47.9 | 57.9 | 42.1 | 39.3 | 60.7 | 53.4 |
| BL | 78.6 | 21.4 | 83.4 | 16.6 | 31.7 | 68.3 | 36.9 | 63.1 | 24.7 | 75.3 | 35.3 | 64.7 | 42.1 | 57.9 | 50.2 | 49.8 | 30.9 | 69.1 | 50.5 |
| SH | 62.8 | 37.2 | 74.2 | 25.8 | 31.2 | 68.8 | 36.4 | 63.6 | 28.8 | 71.2 | 38.0 | 62.0 | 35.7 | 64.3 | 45.7 | 54.3 | 33.4 | 66.6 | 69.1 |
| AR | 74.8 | 25.2 | 78.6 | 21.4 | 19.8 | 80.2 | 36.4 | 63.6 | 17.7 | 82.3 | 24.8 | 75.2 | 31.4 | 68.6 | 37.9 | 62.1 | 23.3 | 76.7 | 52.9 |
| AI | 69.8 | 30.2 | 72.6 | 27.4 | 16.0 | 84.0 | 28.6 | 71.4 | 13.0 | 87.0 | 20.1 | 79.9 | 25.0 | 75.0 | 31.7 | 68.3 | 16.0 | 84.0 | 43.0 |
| SG | 73.0 | 27.0 | 77.6 | 22.4 | 25.1 | 74.9 | 36.3 | 63.7 | 20.2 | 79.8 | 28.1 | 71.9 | 29.8 | 70.2 | 38.0 | 62.0 | 24.6 | 75.4 | 48.6 |
| GR | 70.5 | 29.5 | 75.9 | 24.1 | 25.0 | 75.0 | 36.8 | 63.2 | 23.8 | 76.2 | 40.0 | 60.0 | 35.4 | 64.6 | 42.8 | 57.2 | 29.5 | 70.5 | 42.7 |
| AG | 75.4 | 24.6 | 79.0 | 21.0 | 23.9 | 76.1 | 34.8 | 65.2 | 20.0 | 80.0 | 30.8 | 69.2 | 23.4 | 76.6 | 32.2 | 67.8 | 24.1 | 75.9 | 46.9 |
| TG | 70.0 | 30.0 | 74.3 | 25.7 | 22.0 | 78.0 | 34.3 | 65.7 | 17.8 | 82.2 | 27.2 | 72.8 | 26.7 | 73.3 | 35.2 | 64.8 | 22.8 | 77.2 | 47.9 |
| TI | 73.3 | 26.7 | 80.3 | 19.7 | 41.3 | 58.7 | 42.0 | 58.0 | 40.7 | 59.3 | 54.0 | 46.0 | 43.0 | 57.0 | 49.2 | 50.8 | 39.1 | 60.9 | 37.7 |
| VD | 82.1 | 17.9 | 86.2 | 13.8 | 43.8 | 56.2 | 34.3 | 65.7 | 35.5 | 64.5 | 43.8 | 56.2 | 37.3 | 62.7 | 44.2 | 55.8 | 38.0 | 62.0 | 44.0 |
| VS | 68.8 | 31.2 | 69.0 | 31.0 | 26.1 | 73.9 | 24.6 | 75.4 | 25.2 | 74.8 | 42.8 | 57.2 | 28.8 | 71.2 | 31.7 | 68.3 | 26.0 | 74.0 | 40.1 |
| NE | 79.8 | 20.2 | 84.0 | 16.0 | 48.3 | 51.7 | 33.8 | 66.2 | 40.6 | 59.4 | 44.8 | 55.2 | 40.0 | 60.0 | 45.8 | 54.2 | 44.2 | 55.8 | 55.6 |
| GE | 75.2 | 24.8 | 84.9 | 15.1 | 50.3 | 49.7 | 36.4 | 63.7 | 38.0 | 62.0 | 59.0 | 41.0 | 42.8 | 57.2 | 48.5 | 51.5 | 44.6 | 55.4 | 50.8 |
| JU | 74.0 | 26.0 | 75.9 | 24.1 | 45.4 | 54.6 | 32.6 | 67.4 | 43.8 | 56.2 | 54.9 | 45.1 | 42.0 | 58.0 | 45.5 | 54.5 | 44.5 | 55.5 | 45.0 |
| Total | 76.0 | 24.0 | 80.5 | 19.5 | 32.7 | 67.3 | 37.7 | 62.3 | 27.1 | 72.9 | 37.7 | 62.3 | 33.7 | 66.3 | 41.6 | 58.4 | 31.6 | 68.4 | 48.4 |