

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 32 (2005)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Voting : our road to Europe
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906618>

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Our road to Europe

Swiss voters gave a clear thumbs-up to extension of free movement of persons. Not since 1992 has the outcome of a referendum on Europe been so pronounced. By Rolf Ribi

On 25 September, in splendid late-autumn weather, the Swiss electorate signalled its approval of the Federal Council's policy on Europe, with 56 percent voting in favour of extension of free movement of persons to the ten new European Union member states, and 44 percent voting against. Of the 26 cantons, 19 accepted the proposal. This time a cantonal majority was not required. The clearest Yes came from the canton of Vaud (65.5 percent), followed by Neuchâtel (65.2 percent), Basle City (63.5 percent), Berne (60.2 percent) and Basle Country (59.7 percent). The canton of Ticino led the way in No votes (63.9 percent), followed by Schwyz (59.2 percent).

In contrast to earlier referenda on Europe, there were no signs of a "rösti ditch" between German- and French-speaking Switzerland. Seven German-speaking cantons which had formerly rejected the proposal on Schengen

and Dublin changed tack and voted Yes (Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Schaffhausen, Thurgau, Lucerne, St. Gallen, Aargau and Graubünden). Once more it was the rural cantons that made up the No camp: Glarus (57.1 percent), Appenzell Innerrhoden (56.4 percent), Uri (56.1 percent), Obwalden (54.3 percent) and Nidwalden (53.8 percent).

This decision by voters extends the 2000 agreement with the 15 old EU states on free movement of persons (Bilateral 1) to the ten new EU countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Malta and Cyprus. The mutual opening of labour markets will be controlled in phases. Based on experiences to date with the 15 old EU countries, there are no serious grounds to expect any mass immigration of cheap labour from the East.

PREVIEW OF THE REFERENDA ON 27 NOVEMBER: Food from non-GM farming. A people's initiative calls for a five-year moratorium on the import and cultivation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Voters will also be asked to decide on Sunday trading in major railway stations. By René Lenzin

In the consultation on the gene technology law, a coalition of representatives from consumer and environmental protection organisations called for a moratorium on GMOs in the farming sector. But the Federal Council and the majority of parliament were in favour of a strict permit procedure rather than an outright ban. Only six months after the final vote in both houses of parliament, the losers have once more tabled their concerns: In September 2003 they submitted the people's initiative for a five-year moratorium on GM farming, signed by 120,000 voters.

The initiative proposes a five-year ban on the import or commercialisation of GM plants, seeds and animals intended for use in the agricultural sector or for the production of foods. The ban would not cover the import of GM foods such as maize or soya or research into gene technology. The initiators believe it is too soon to allow gene technology to be used in farming since it is still fraught with risks and too many questions remain unanswered. Moreover, they are of the opinion that Swiss farmers be given the opportunity to position themselves on the fiercely competitive agricultural market with a "GM-free" label.

The Federal Council and the majority of parliament recommend that the initiative be rejected, arguing that most concerns have already been addressed and that the moratorium would violate international trading agreements. Although the initiative does not ban research, opponents are concerned that it would send out negative signals for Switzerland's status as a centre of research and production. The Council of States rejected the initiative by 35 votes to 10. The National Council tied at 92 to 92, and the initiative was rejected by the President's casting vote.

Sunday trading at major railway stations

The second proposal concerns trading hours in major railway stations and at airports. The Federal Council and parliament propose an amendment to the law which would allow shops in public transport centres to remain open on Sundays and official holidays. In reality, this rule is already in practice, but according to a Federal Court ruling the law must be revised to reflect the actual situation. The change was opposed by trade unions, which successfully launched a referendum on which voters must now decide.

Commentary: Relief

Given the controversial and emotionally-charged nature of people's referenda on our relationship with Europe, the outcome was met with great relief by the Federal Council, parties who had campaigned for the proposal, and the business sector. The referendum campaign lasted a long time, the business sector invested millions in advertisements urging voters to vote Yes, and newspapers were filled with readers' letters on the topic. For a long time the outcome was uncertain, and it was only at the last minute that the balance tipped in favour of a Yes vote.

Opponents' arguments painted a false picture of unchecked immigration, an excessive influx of foreigners, sinking wages, rising unemployment and increasing strains on the social welfare system. Voters were not swayed by this propaganda and sensibly stuck to the facts: The European Union is by far our most important economic partner; the new member states in the East are dynamic growth markets, and the expertise of their labour force is much in demand. Even more important was the consideration that the vote was about the policy on Europe adopted by the Federal Council and parliament. With 16 bilateral accords now signed with the European Union, Switzerland has gained a tailor-made entry to the world's largest internal market. It would truly have been an own goal had this regulated and intensive relationship with the European Union been placed at risk.

Swiss diplomacy deserves the credit for having negotiated a good agreement on free movement of persons. The labour market will be opened in phases over a long transitional period, and subject to strict constraints on immigration. But it was the accompanying measures (minimum wage guarantees and conditions of employment) formulated by parliament that "rescued" this people's referendum. It is now up to the authorities and social partners to ensure that these guarantees are honoured for all employees.

So what happens now with the application for membership submitted to Brussels by Switzerland 13 years ago? Should it finally be consigned to the archives or kept alive as a second European policy option? Opinions are divided. The Left view it as a European perspective, the Liberal Democrats as a troublesome relic, and the Swiss People's Party as an evil reminder. They all urge the Federal Council to draw up a new report on European policy – before the parliamentary elections in October 2007. ROLF RIBI