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The outcome of the people's referendum of 27 November was a clear thumbs-up by voters for GM-free agriculture and a hair's-breadth victory for cities for Sunday trading at railway stations and airports. The turnout was close to 42 percent. By Rolf Ribi



Yes to GM-free initiative

The people's initiative "For GM-free food products" was launched by a new alliance of farmers, consumers and environmentalists. The outcome of the Sunday referendum was a total surprise: 55.7 percent of voters and all 26 cantons and half-cantons voted in favour of the proposal for a five-year moratorium on the cultivation of genetically modified plants and the raising of genetically modified animals by Swiss farmers. The outcome signalled a victory for the new Left-Green-Farmers' alliance over the Federal Council, parliament, centre-right parties, the business community and most research scientists.

Support for the people's initiative was particularly high in western Switzerland, with the clearest Yes majority recorded by the canton of Jura (75.9 percent), followed by Neuchâtel (65.3 percent), Geneva (64.5 percent), Ticino (64.5 percent) and Vaud (62.6 percent), as well as Uri (59.8 percent), Fribourg (59.5 percent) and Schaffhausen (59.2 percent). The moratorium was even approved by the cantons of Basle City and Basle Country, home to many chemical and pharma concerns, as well as the industrial cantons of Zurich and Aargau. The bias in favour of the moratorium was generally more pronounced in conservative rural regions than in urban regions.

The new constitutional article supersedes the Gene Technology Law of 2004, which permits the cultivation of genetically modified plants under strict conditions and subject to a lengthy test procedure. Such plants are not, however, cultivated in our country, and there are no GM foods on the shelves of our supermarkets. Yet even now that this initiative has been passed, it is still legal to import products made from GM organisms – as a (declared) food for humans and as animal feed.



Sunday shopping scrapes through

A mere 23,000 votes decided the referendum in favour of an amendment to the labour law to permit Sunday trading at railway stations and airports. In the final analysis, the initiative was accepted by 50.6 percent of voters and rejected by 49.4 percent. No cantonal majority was required for this law – with only seven cantons in favour, this quorum would clearly have been insufficient. The outcome was decided by urban cantons and, in particular, the airport cantons of Zurich, Basle and Geneva. At 62.7 percent, Zurich gave the clearest thumbs-up, followed by Basle City (58.8 percent), Basle Country (57.1 percent) and Geneva (55.1 percent). Apart from these cantons, only Zug (54.6 percent), Berne (52.2 percent) and Aargau (51.4 percent) approved the labour law amendment. Opposition was strong in rural regions, and particularly in predominantly Catholic cantons. The highest number of No votes was recorded by the Jura (78.5 percent), followed by Valais (65.3 percent), Uri (63.3 percent) and Appenzell Innerrhoden (61.4 percent), as well as Fribourg, Thurgau, Lucerne, Obwalden and Vaud.

Shops in major railway stations and at airports can now open and employ staff on Sundays, irrespective of surface area or type of goods. In addition to travel accessories, the law will now permit refrigerators, televisions or clothes to be sold on Sundays. The new law caters to modern lifestyles and shopping habits in cities and addresses the needs of tourist resorts. It promotes busy, safe railway stations and thus supports public transport. Trade unions had launched the referendum due to the poor level of shop wages and parliament's refusal to draw up a collective employment agreement for retail employees.

Commentary Bio-Switzerland

The outcome was totally unexpected: On this cold winter's day, all 26 cantons and half-cantons as well as a clear majority of voters in cities and rural regions came out in favour of the people's initiative "for GM-free food products". A five-year moratorium on the use of gene technology in Swiss agriculture will now enter into force. Neither genetically modified seeds nor genetically manipulated animals may be cultivated or raised. Swiss voters want to see natural, species-appropriate, GM-free, organic farming methods. The aim is for a bio-Switzerland that opens up new markets to its farmers for their quality "GM-free" certified products.

As elsewhere in Europe, the Swiss are sceptical about genetically modified foods – surveys show that 70 percent of the population is against GMOs. A more deep-seated reason lies in the national psyche, which opposes any intervention in the genetic makeup of humans and plants and, by extension, in the nature of creation. But the moratorium does not mean time out for researchers. They need to find answers to questions such as: Is it possible to grow organic plants alongside GM plants? What are the long-term implications for biodiversity? A national research programme on the benefits and risks of gene technology could provide the answers.

The people's referendum on Sunday trading at railway stations and airports turned out to be a cliff-hanger. Only at the last minute was a wafer-thin majority in favour of the revised labour law revealed. The unions are unruffled in their defeat, since almost half of the voting public endorsed their referendum. The business sector views Sunday trading at railway stations as merely a first step, and wants to extend Sunday shopping to include all retail outlets, with a general abolition of restrictions on trading hours. The unions, the church and the rural population are opposed to any such moves.

One good thing came out of this referendum: It triggered a genuine debate on the importance of Sunday as a day of rest for individuals, families and society as a whole: in other words, a discussion on the true needs of people.

ROLF RIBI