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Biometric passports approved by the tightest of margins

The Swiss people endorsed the introduction of passports containing biometric data by a margin of just 5,500 votes. By contrast, the constitutional article on complementary medicine met with clear approval. By René Lenzin

It could hardly have been any closer. On 17 May, 50.1% of the people voted in favour of the law to make biometric passports compulsory. If the proposal had required a cantonal majority, it would not have gone through as it was rejected in 16 of the 26 cantons (see map). The turnout was a modest 38%. Opponents of the proposal made appeals and demanded recounts in several cantons, but to no avail. At the time of going to press, a further appeal was pending before the Federal Supreme Court.

Anyone renewing their passport from next year will have an image of their face and their fingerprints stored on a chip in the document. What is currently available on a voluntary basis will now become mandatory for everyone. By introducing biometric passports, Switzerland is moving into line with the European Union, which has also made passports with digital body recognition elements mandatory. It is also responding to more stringent immigration regulations in the USA. Swiss citizens without biometric passports will require a visa to travel to the USA in future.

However, it was not the introduction of biometric passports per se that proved controversial prior to the referendum. Opinion was split over the central database where federal government will store the digital data. Following the de facto stalemate between supporters and opponents of the proposal, the latter group called for plans for the central storage of data to be abandoned. Politicians have now responded to this request. The National Council committee responsible has agreed an amendment to the law just passed. The law is now to state that identity cards will not contain any biometric data. And the central database is either not to be introduced at all or only introduced on a voluntary basis. Parliamentary consultations on these proposals were still ongoing at the time of going to press.

67% say yes to complementary medicine

The constitutional article on complementary medicine produced far less controversy. Two thirds of voters and all the cantons approved the following provision: "As part of their responsibilities, federal government and the cantons will ensure that complementary medicine is taken into account." However, what this clause means in concrete terms remains unclear. The proposal's supporters want alternative therapies, such as anthroposophical medicine, homeopathy, neural therapy, herbal medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, to be included in the basic services covered by compulsory health insurance. However, after the referendum, Health Minister Pascal Couchepin, who had reluctantly supported the proposal, was unwilling to guarantee that these treatments would automatically be covered by health insurance schemes in future. As with all services covered by basic insurance, he argued, evidence is first required to show they are effective, appropriate and cost-efficient.

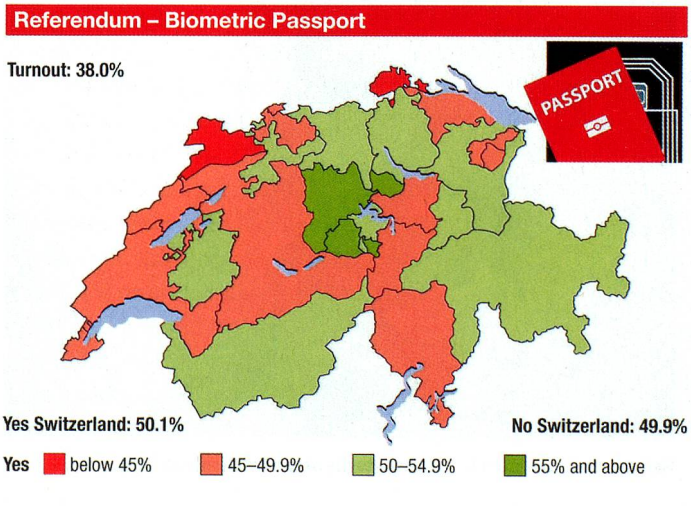

Image: Keystone

Comment

Approval of the passport of the future

The real strength of a democracy lies in the way it deals with minorities in general and the losers of referenda in particular. This is especially true when the result is as close as it was with biometric passports. The Federal Council and Parliament should therefore be applauded for taking the concerns of the defeated side seriously. As a result, Switzerland is to refrain from using biometric data in identity cards provided there is no need to do so from a domestic or foreign policy perspective. In addition, the central database for the digital photographs and fingerprints in the new Swiss passports is not to be used for police investigations under any circumstances.

On the other hand, a victory is a victory in a democracy, and the difference between approval and rejection can be extremely tight. It may therefore seem odd that the losing side is now calling for the central database not to be introduced at all, or only introduced on a voluntary basis. This demand raises questions, such as: Would the same groups now be calling for a new law for a voluntary database if an equally tight result had gone the other way? When is a result close enough to cause the controversial element of the proposal to be moderated or revoked? With a difference of 5,000 votes? 10,000? or 15,000? And what would the demands be if the people were to reject tax reductions by an equally tight margin? Would the losing side call for the option of paying less tax on a voluntary basis?

Of course, Parliament has the right to amend the recently passed law and – in the event of a referendum – to put it to the people again. A better approach, however, would be to introduce the biometric passports now, showing appropriate consideration for data protection. Because of all the bickering over the central database, we have almost lost sight of the fact that there were good reasons for supporting the new travel documents. They will be more secure than their predecessors. Switzerland cannot avoid the international trend towards biometric identification without damaging the economy and tourism. The Swiss people like to travel and to do business internationally. This is why a majority ultimately voted for the passport of the future despite their reservations. RENÉ LENZIN