

Politics/Voting : results of the referendum of 24 September : 1. new foreigners' law and amended asylum law approved : 2. proposal to divert National Bank profits to the AHV rejected

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Preview to the referendum of 26 November

1. Contributions to the new EU Member States
2. Uniform child allowance of at least CHF 200

In conjunction with the second package of bilateral negotiations, Switzerland and the EU have come to two more agreements. These concern the extension of free movement of persons to include the ten new EU Member States, and a contribution of CHF 1 billion to these countries. The negotiation dossier itself and the extension of the agreement on free movement of persons already passed the referendum test last year. Now the electorate must also vote on the third part. The Swiss People's Party (SVP), supported by the Swiss Democrats and the Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland, has succeeded in pressing for a referendum on these cohesion contributions.

The Federal Council and parliament want this financial support to be paid within the framework of the Federal Law on Eastern Europe. Rather than being made to the EU Cohesion Fund, payments would constitute direct contributions by Switzerland to bilaterally-agreed projects in eastern European countries. Only the overall total and its distribution among the different countries is defined. The payments are to be staggered over ten years. The two ministries that provide development aid to the east will be required to cover 60 percent of the extra expenditure through internal cost-cutting without compromising development aid to countries in the southern hemisphere. The remaining 40 percent will come from general federal budgets.

The price of bilateral cooperation

The SVP demanded that the CHF 1 billion be funded budget-neutrally. It also wanted the law amended to prevent Switzerland having to make similar payments if Romania, Bulgaria or other countries also joined the EU. Having failed to get either demand approved in parliament, the SVP has now sought a referendum. The bill was passed by 127 votes to 53 in the National Council, and 37 votes to 1 in the Council of States.

The Federal Council and the majority of parliament look on the payment as the price

Results of the referendum of 24 September

1. New foreigners' law and amended asylum law approved
2. Proposal to divert National Bank profits to the AHV rejected

It's final: Switzerland can modernise its immigration policies. The voters have brushed aside a centre-left referendum and clearly approved legislative changes proposed by the Federal Council and parliament. The new regulations will lay down a twin-track immigration system. Whereas bilateral agreements mean that European Union citizens are treated just like Swiss nationals, would-be immigrants from outside the EU will now only have access to the Swiss labour market if they are highly skilled. Foreigners already living in Switzerland will be helped to integrate better.

In addition to the foreigners' law, the Swiss also voted to toughen up the asylum regulations. Although the referendum committee got broader support in opposing such changes and campaigning focussed almost entirely on this issue, the two bills received almost identical backing: 68 percent of voters said "Yes" to the foreigners' law, while 67.8 percent approved the amended asylum law. The moves were endorsed by all cantons. The "Yes" votes for both bills topped the 75 percent-mark in the cantons of Aargau, Appenzell-Innerhoden, Glarus, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Schwyz, Thurgau and Zug. The new laws fared less well in western Switzerland than in the German-speaking areas, getting slightly over 50 percent support in Geneva, Jura and Neuenburg.

National Bank profits not for the AHV

A Social Democrat-led bid to redirect some of the Swiss National Bank's profits to the old-age and survivors' pension scheme (AHV) failed to get popular approval. Overall, 58.3 percent of voters said "No" to the proposal. Only the cantons of Ticino (57.5%), Basel City (53.6%) and Geneva (51.3%) backed the move. The outcome was very tight in Jura (49.2% Yes votes), while the proposal was most unambiguously rejected in Appenzell-Innerrhoden (No: 74.9%), Zug (66.8%), Glarus (66.5%) as well as Appenzell-Ausserrhoden and Thurgau (both 66.2%).

RL

Comment

Bitter defeat for the left

Before Sunday's referendum, the left was confident it would get majority backing for its "National Bank profits for the AHV" campaign. The outcome was therefore extremely sobering: Three-fifths of eligible voters in 23 of the 26 cantons opposed the move. In other words, a clear majority of the Swiss population has shied away from taking a gamble that no country has yet embarked on, namely linking economic and welfare policies. As enticing as the windfall may be for the AHV, the people see it neither as a lasting solution for safeguarding pensions nor did they want federal and cantonal revenues cut by CHF 1.5 billion a year.

However despite the clear verdict, the day's winners can't afford to rest on their laurels. An ageing population means the AHV faces serious shortfalls in the near future. Switzerland must therefore put together reforms capable of securing a majority based on a combination of tweaking expenditure and raising contributions. The political left suffered an even greater defeat on the amendments to the asylum and foreigners' laws. Although even the popular parties had criticised the laws, and asylum applications are at their lowest point in years, the majority of the Swiss people is convinced that the asylum regulations need further toughening up. And yet the outcome is hardly surprising since voters have endorsed all immigration policy changes proposed by the Federal Council and parliament in recent years.

By backing the foreigners' law, the electorate has paved the way for modern immigration and integration policies. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether the amended asylum law will meet its backers' high expectations. After all, the tougher regulations are unlikely to prevent people coming to Switzerland not because of persecution in their home country, but simply in search of a better life in the rich north.

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