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Referendum of May 17, 1992

Seven referendums – six yes

May 17, 1992, saw voting in seven federal referendums – which is an all-time record. Six of the texts put to the voters were approved, while one was rejected.

Swiss membership of Bretton Woods

55.8% of Swiss voters approved the Federal Decree concerning Switzerland's membership of the institutions created at Bretton Woods (International Monetary Fund and World Bank units). The law regulating such membership obtained a 56.4% Yes vote.

Protection of watercourses

The Total Revision of the Law on Watercourses was approved by 66.1% of voters, with 33.9% of No votes. The new legislation to protect watercourses aims to prevent excessive damming and to guarantee minimum water flow below dams. The voters rejected the popular initiative entitled "To safeguard our watercourses" which included regulations stricter than those contained in the revision of the law. This received a 62.9% No vote (including a negative vote from all cantons). The initiative originated with ecologists and fishermen.

Third time lucky: acceptance of an alternative to military service fulfils a decade-old demand.
(Photo: Keystone)



Genetics and artificial insemination

73.8% of voters and all the cantons except Valais accepted a constitutional article relating to genetic engineering and artificial insemination. Its aim was to protect human, animal and plant life against abuse from genetic science. The new article prohibits the sale of embryos and use of surrogate mothers, as well as regulating in vitro fertilisation.

Alternative service

All the Swiss cantons and 82.5% of voters approved a constitutional article allowing for the creation of an alternative to military service for conscientious objectors. For the moment this is a question of incorporating the principle in the Swiss constitution, and Parliament will now have to frame a law stating the precise form the alternative service will take.

Commentary

1. In spite of the importance and variety of the texts which were put forward for a decision by the people, voter turnout remained well below the 40% mark. Although we are now accustomed to such low percentages in Switzerland, it had been hoped that this time there might have been an improvement – particularly since people unwilling to give up their Sunday outings could vote by post for the first time. There is also a sense of apathy amongst some sections of the population – a feeling that it is not worth bothering since policy is merely handed down by the government (this is certainly the case for Ticino) and disagreement with some recent government decisions, such as the experiment of distributing heroin free to addicts.

2. Quite apart from the low turnout, however, voter support for Swiss membership of the IMF must be taken as an

Switzerland to apply for EC membership

To the surprise of most observers, it was announced on May 18, 1992, that Switzerland would in the very near future apply to join the European Community. It is thought that voter approval of Swiss membership of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund the day previously had strengthened the majority within the Federal Council. **WIL**

Sexual offences under criminal law

The revision of the Penal Code provisions relating to sexual offences was accepted by 73.1% of voters. The age of consent for children remains at 16, but teen-age sex will no longer be a criminal offence provided that there is less than three years between those involved. So-called soft pornography will be allowed while hard pornography will be treated more strictly than before. Marital rape also becomes a criminal offence upon complaint.

Voter participation in these referendums was slightly below 38%.

P-A.T.

important signal. It means that there is now a readiness to open the country up to the outside world which would have been unthinkable only a very few years

Giuseppe Rusconi

ago. In spite of this, however, it would be wrong to be too optimistic about future referendums on the European Economic Area and the European Community. The IMF is not something which will affect voters directly, while this will certainly be the case with European issues. And in any case things may possibly have changed for the worse in people's eyes before these votes take place.

3. A large majority of those voting approved the inclusion in the constitution of an article accepting the creation of an alternative to military service. Since two initiatives proposing precisely this were refused by a substantial majority in 1977 and 1984, it is clear that a marked change in attitude has taken

Referendum press roundup

Many of the country's dailies gave at least a page to the outcome the following day, and headlines referred to Switzerland's unexpected decision to "open up" to the wider world.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Christoph Wehrli writes in this Zurich daily (liberal): "The stride towards co-responsibility in the Bretton Woods system is important and gratifying. The key role of the two institutions was underlined in the referendum campaign, and the decision is all the more important for being ratified through direct democracy. Acceptance was not overwhelming, but at 56% clear enough". However, "Bretton Woods in itself could not count on much popularity, and entry was resisted not only by those who favour isolationism (in the name of independence) but also for reasons connected with economic development". Wehrli adds: "The referendum on the IMF and the World Bank has been thought of in some places as a test for our European policies". But: "The two subjects are different".

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

"The agreement by the voters to Switzerland's membership of the Bretton

place here; but the real fight will take place only when the actual form of the alternative service has to be defined in an implementation law.

4. Voters accepted the proposals dealing with moral questions – but with a more qualified majority. These dealt with the regulation of in vitro fertilisation and the new Penal Code provisions on sexual offences – which were very controversial in Parliament, particularly the decision that teen-age sex on either side of 16 should no longer be a criminal offence. The strongly Roman Catholic Canton of Valais voted No on each of these on the ground that they were too permissive.

5. The popular initiative "To safeguard our watercourses" was rejected by a clear majority on the ground that it went too far (and because it might lead to higher electricity prices). However, the Revised Law on Watercourses, which will improve the present environmental situation slightly, was accepted. ■

Woods institutions may be seen as an unexpected success", writes Carlo Manzoni in the main daily of Italian-speaking Switzerland (independent centre-right). He continues: "The fact is that not many observers expected this result, although federal officials in Berne were hopeful. Past experience has shown that it is difficult to get a proposal through the referendum process when it is simultaneously attacked from the right and the left". In contrast to Wehrli, Manzoni sees a clear relationship between the referendum on Bretton Woods and the upcoming vote on the European Economic Area: "After yesterday's result we can take an optimistic view of the European referendum at the end of the year."

24 Heures

Writing in this Lausanne daily (independent, centre-left), Denis Barrelet comes to a similar conclusion: "Away with the nationalist arrogance which whispers to us that we are lucky to be able to forget about the world's hungry in their camps of death. Into the dustbin with the hypocrisy about the third world which tries to make us believe that the IMF will change our image if we turn our backs on it. Yesterday reason triumphed. And also healthy self-confidence". Barrelet continues: "We were on tenterhooks till the last minute. Those in private industry who thought the cause was lost from the outset refused to contribute financially to the campaign... We can now be certain that the Swiss have finally said goodbye to their hedgehog mentality. Alpine railways, European Economic Area, European Community entry. We can approach these tasks with new confidence".

Basler Zeitung

Writing in the Basle daily (independent centre-left), Peter Amstutz has this to say about acceptance of the constitutional article on the alternative to military service: "The principle of national service for all is now defined by an alternative to military service. With a majority which cannot be argued away, both voters and cantons have expressed their confidence in a more peaceful Europe and have cleared the way for a solution to the vexed question of conscientious

Current popular initiatives

For an environment-friendly and efficient agriculture

Mr. Melchior Ehrler, Lauerstrasse 10
CH-5200 Brugg AG

For a work-free National Day

Mr. Rudolf Keller, Prattlerstrasse 7
CH-4402 Frenkendorf BL

For the extension of the old-age pension and disability schemes

Mr. Fritz Leuthy, Monbijoustrasse 61
P.O. Box, CH-3000 Berne 23

Switzerland without police snooping

Mrs. Katherin Weber, P.O. Box 6948
CH-3001 Berne

Farmers and consumers – for agriculture close to nature

Mr. Urs Meier, WWF – Switzerland
Förrlibuckstrasse 66, CH-8037 Zurich

Against illegal immigration

Mr. Max Friedli, Ahornweg 2
P.O. Box, CH-3000 Berne 9

objection. But with one condition: this does not mean that there is to be a free choice between military service and its civilian alternative".

Nouvelliste

et Feuille d'Avis du Valais

To conclude this press roundup, we quote from an article by François Dayer in the biggest daily of Canton Valais (Roman Catholic) on the voters' acceptance of the revision of the law on sexual offences: "The rejection of the two 'morality' texts by Canton Valais alone will certainly strengthen the received opinions of our 'admirers' in German-speaking Switzerland. But the fact that these two negative results contrast with strong approval in others shows that moral values are still highly regarded in this canton and that the Church – which gave no detailed instructions but merely pointed the way – is not considered by the voters as without importance. In present circumstances this may bring us a fair degree of reassurance". ■

Federal Ballots

September 27, 1992

December 6, 1992

Subjects not yet decided.