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Twice NO: Solidarity with the weak

The federal votes of September 28 gave a double NO. With a slim majority of only 30,304, voters rejected the urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment insurance scheme. And they said NO to the popular initiative "Youth without drugs" by 7 to 3.

Rejection of the urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment insurance scheme means that the new measures will have to be cancelled from December 1. Benefits for those out of work will go back up by 1% and 3% respectively, and the federal government will have to return to paying 5% of the global cost of the unemployment insurance scheme.

Broken down by canton, the results of this referendum more or less reflect Switzerland's unemployment map. This means that the NO was strongest in all cantons having a jobless rate

higher than the national average of 5% – plus Fribourg and the two Basle half-cantons. The rejection was biggest in Jura (80.4%) and Neuchâtel (75.4%). The YES vote was highest in eastern Switzerland (Appenzell Outer Rhodes (74.6%) and St. Gall (60.6%). Zurich gave a YES vote of 54.5%, while in Berne the result was almost evenly balanced, with a majority in favour of just 82 votes.

All the cantons voted against the popular initiative "Youth without drugs". The rejection rate varied between 55.2% in Valais, followed by 59.3% in Ticino, to 82% in Geneva, with 81.5% in Basle-City. The failure of this initiative means that parliament can now revise its drug legislation and include the various elements of the federal government's policy, in particular medically supervised distribution of heroin



The striking NO to the initiative "Youth without drugs" bolsters the Federal Council's anti-drug policy. (Photo: Keystone)

to the worst addicted amongst the 30,000 hard-drug consumers in the country.

PAT

Commentary

It was a message of security and hope that Swiss voters expressed on September 28. The signal transmitted to politicians could not have been clearer: social security comes first.

Referendum result

Popular initiative "Youth without drugs"

YES 545,944 (29.4%)
NO 1,313,533 (70.6%)
All cantons

Urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment insurance scheme

YES 900,950 (49.2%)
NO 931,254 (50.8%)

Voter participation: 40%

It is true that the NO to the urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment insurance scheme gives no hint either on how the scheme should now be paid for or how the federal budget should be balanced. But it does point roughly in the direction that those responsible for working out federal policy want to take. These will now have to use their imagination. A few years ago voters agreed to reductions in unemployment insurance benefits, but now they do not want those out of work to suffer again. The message is all the clearer for the fact that since January 1 of this year the loss to the unemployed – reductions of often less than two Swiss francs a day – seemed no great sacrifice. But it may be said that the NO to the urgent measures was really aimed at any projects or ideas making the rounds which might lead to dismantlement of the unemployment insurance scheme.

The rejection of the popular initiative "Youth without drugs" also reflected concern to maintain what has been achieved on the social security front.

Here too voters were stating clearly what they do not want: a return to drug policies based only on severity and abstinence. But unlike with the unemployment scheme, there is a solution to this problem, and it is actually being practised – in the form of the differentiated approach to drug addiction taken by the federal government since 1991. This policy is aimed at stabilisation and long-term reduction of the number of addicts in four areas: tough controls, prevention, therapy, and damage limitation combined with survival assistance. The policy includes the controversial experiments in supplying heroin under medical supervision, and it will now benefit from the approval of a very substantial majority of voters, including those in French-speaking Switzerland. Voters will have another opportunity of giving an opinion on this finely tuned policy when they are faced, probably next year, with the popular initiative lodged by those in favour of legalising drugs.

Pierre-André Tschanz

Press Review

The day after the results, the Swiss press was full of comment, mostly treating the two votes separately. Leader writers as a whole were pleased about the clear message sent by voters, as for example in this passage from Ticino:

laRegione Ticino

It seems that the key-words which links the two responses to these two different questions, showing of very great realism, are deep-seated and healthy secularity. Secularity in this sense means that the majority of voters wanted to keep their distance from an institutionalised and partisan hierarchy and insisted on reasoning with their own wits and particularly with their own sense of finesse.

Here is some opinion about the NO to the urgent federal decree on financing the unemployment scheme:

Basler Zeitung

The political class must get accustomed to the fact that for one half of voters the unemployment insurance scheme is not going to disappear, regardless of who is going to plug the holes, while the other half would have allowed modest reductions. But since no one has any interest in bleeding unemployment insurance at the cost of the federal budget the thorny way towards acceptable reform of the whole social security system through restructuring will have to be tackled.

Tages-Anzeiger

It serves the centre-right majority in parliament right. These representatives of the people decided on a ridiculous and anti-social austerity measure which did very little for the federal budget without thinking it through. Parliament was so sure of itself that it made the Federal Council's proposal even harder. And of course it was not thought necessary to compensate the anti-social reductions in daily allowances by any improvement in social benefits. The possibility of losing, and thereby unnecessarily endangering major objectives like balancing the federal budget, was not even considered.

JOURNAL DE GENEVE et Gazette de Lausanne

The rejection of the unemployment insurance decree – contrasting with acceptance in 1993 (with 70% in favour) of an earlier decree which did reduce benefits to 70% for unemployed people without dependants – follows rejection of the labour law last year. In both cases voters have shown that they are not prepared to sacrifice the human dimension of labour.

L'Impartial

Largely due to a group of jobless people in La Chaux-de-Fonds, quite apart from the left-wing bosses, the rejection of the unemployment decree is first and foremost an enormous victory for direct democracy and, we would say, for the citizen at the grass-roots.

LA LIBERTÉ

The government and parliament are largely responsible for their narrow but hurtful defeat. Since 1993 the unemployment insurance scheme has been afflicted with cut after cut: reduced benefits, five waiting days without benefits, accident insurance and vocational pension schemes reduced in revenge. Without this near-miss the process would have continued. It was beginning to have its effect.

Giornale del Popolo

The margin of manoeuvre is becoming narrower and narrower for the government, and we would not wish to play Cassandra by stating that serious social unrest is on the way. Unless, that is, a

Federal referendums

November 23, 1997

No referendums to be held

March 15, 1998

Subjects not yet decided

June 7, 1998

Subjects not yet decided

September 27, 1998

Subjects not yet decided

November 29, 1998

Subjects not yet decided

substantial recovery should also appear on our horizon (as in many other countries) after years of zero economic growth.

There follow some extracts from the leaders about the rejection of the popular initiative "Youth without drugs".

NEUE LÜZERNER ZEITUNG

This can be built on when it comes to the revision of the narcotics law which has been on the table for such a long time. Questions like whether drug consumption should be decriminalised or whether the revised law should allow provision of heroin under medical supervision to the severely addicted can in future be considered against a much clearer background after the latest referendum result.

Die Offschweiz

It is simply self-evident that it would have been an expensive stupidity to have nullified all the hard-won progress made in drug prevention and combating addiction for a drug-free utopia.

Bieler Tagblatt

What is surprising is the clarity of the rejection, which in its size was a real own goal for the initiators.

Le Nouvelliste

A large majority made its choice based not on emotion but on reason alone. It emphasises that abstinence continues to be the sole aim of anti-drug policy. But this should not be confused with the means to the end, which may be multiple and should be decided on by doctors and not by politicians.