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A resounding Yes to the bilateral treaties

Swiss voters have accepted the bilateral agreements by 67.2%. The only dissenting cantons were the Ticino and Schwyz.

Switzerland has normalised its relations with Europe: seven and a half years after voting against the European Economic Area (EEA) the electorate has accepted the bilateral agreements between our country and the European Union (EU). The national average of Yes votes was 67.2%. All cantons apart from the Ticino and Schwyz voted for the existing 7-dossier agreement package (covering air traffic, road transport, free movement of persons, agriculture, public procurement and technical trade barriers).

Results of the federal referendum

Canton	The bilateral agreements		Turnout
	YES%	NO%	in %
ZH	69.9	30.1	50.2
BE	68.5	31.5	44.3
LU	62.6	37.4	54.7
UR	52.3	47.7	51.7
SZ	49.8	50.2	50.7
OW	55.5	44.5	47.9
NW	55.9	44.1	54.9
GL	57.2	42.8	47.5
ZG	69.2	30.8	54.3
FR	74.6	25.4	45.0
SO	66.6	33.4	49.6
BS	72.3	27.7	54.8
BL	70.9	29.1	48.6
SH	61.1	38.9	66.1
AR	62.1	37.9	54.0
AI	51.9	48.1	46.6
SG	63.2	36.8	44.3
GR	58.6	41.4	40.8
AG	62.2	37.8	42.8
TG	57.2	42.8	46.2
TI	43.0	57.0	51.9
VD	80.3	19.7	45.8
VS	65.6	34.4	41.7
NE	79.4	20.6	52.2
GE	78.7	21.3	58.1
JU	77.3	22.7	47.5
Total	67.2	32.8	48.0

The most convincing acceptance of the bilaterals was in French-speaking Switzerland, which has always been pro-Europe. The percentage of Yes votes in the canton of Vaud reached 80.3%, and in Neuchâtel (79.4%), Geneva (78.7%) and the Jura (77.3%) also, the result was almost unanimous. This time there was no sign of the Röstli trench: unlike the EEA vote, German-speaking Switzerland followed the Federal Council's recommendations for the vote on 21 May. Acceptance was particularly high in both Basle cantons, where in some areas the percentage of Yes votes clearly exceeded 70%. Seven out of ten voters in the canton of Zurich also voted Yes. The argument concerning the economic importance of the bilaterals apparently fell on fruitful ground here.

With the exception of Schwyz, all German-speaking cantons voted in favour of the seven dossiers, in some areas clearly (Berne 68.5%, Zug 69.2%), in others less convincingly, and in several cantons in central Switzerland (Obwalden, Nidwalden, Uri) and eastern Switzerland (Appenzell Innerrhoden) only just scraping above the 50% level.

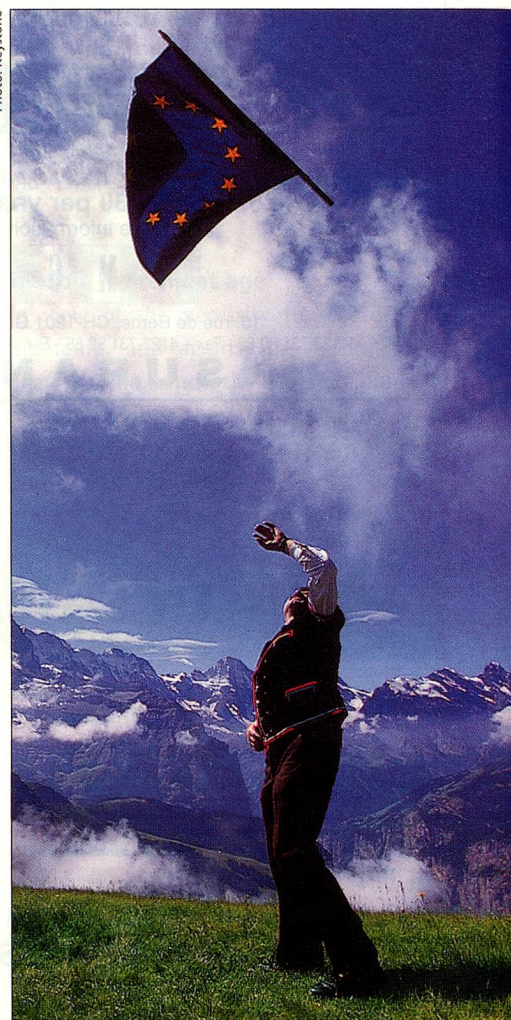
Anxiety in the Ticino

Only one canton rejected the bilaterals outright: the Ticino, whose 57% No vote signalled its concerns about the free movement of persons. This was to some extent the expected result from the Italian-speaking canton and is a direct consequence of the intensive opposition campaign waged by the Lega dei Ticinesi, which together with the Swiss Democrats successfully pushed through this referendum on the agreements. The campaign caused no great ripples in other parts of the country, which perhaps explains the relatively poor turnout of 48%.

In its first statement following the vote the Federal Council naturally expressed satisfaction at the clear result. Now it aims to get the best out of the agreements.

"We want to show that all of Switzerland, including Ticino, will benefit from the agreement," stressed Pascal Couchepin, adding, "The Swiss electorate was called on

Photo: Keystone



A sky full of EU stars: the electorate has given the bilateral agreements a clear thumbs-up.

to answer a question: It said Yes and only Yes to the bilateral treaties." Joseph Deiss also thanked the referendum initiators for giving the nation the opportunity to state their position on such an important issue, and added, "The Federal Council does not take this Yes as a mandate to pursue political integration." Both Federal Councillors also announced that Switzerland would be taking up negotiations with the EU in the medium term with a view to additional agreements in the fiscal, security, customs and agriculture areas.

DB 

PRESS REVIEW

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

The resounding No (...) from a sizeable portion of Ticino's voters must be interpreted as a signal of deep misgivings, which must be ascribed the requisite importance by Berne (and Bellinzona). Particularly since it is now necessary to ensure that the accompanying measures devised to cushion the negative impact of this new situation are implemented with appropriate resolve and rigour.

Basler Zeitung

With the bilateral treaties with the European Union (EU) Switzerland has crossed a critical threshold on the road to integration. Free movement of persons and overland transport are so fundamental that in one step Switzerland has bridged its distance from the EU to become a much closer neighbour.

Tages-Anzeiger

Effusive celebration would, however, be inappropriate. What we have achieved with the bilateral agreements is no more than a diluted version of the EEA. The Yes cannot be interpreted as a sign of gearing up for Brussels. All that has been gained is a temporary marriage between political insight and economic reason.

DIE SÜDOSTSCHWEIZ

Admittedly the Federal Council must now be concerned about its credibility: the credibility which it soundly undermined in the run-up to the EEA vote when, shooting from the hip, it declared EU membership as its "strategic objective". To make doubly sure of yesterday's vote, the Federal Council constructed a formula whereby a Yes to the bilateral agreements was completely separate from the discussion on EU membership. This was also not very clever, because it

is simply not true. But the words have been spoken, and the Federal Council must unwillingly move down a gear on the question of membership.

le Quotidien Jurassien

French-speaking Switzerland, including the Jura, has reconfirmed its 1992 vote. German-speaking Swiss, on the other hand, have switched. Thanks also to sound reasoning and economic necessity, voters this month have shown that progress is possible and sustainable. The experience of free movement of persons as well as Switzerland's lack of influence in this forward-moving Europe should relax attitudes and facilitate the growth of a pro-EU voting majority. This is the hope that springs from the Yes to the bilaterals.

TRIBUNE DE GENÈVE

Not Europe but rather pure pragmatism has triumphed at the ballot box. It would be gratifying to see in this vote the signs of a new opening and nothing else; but it also contains signs of a profane egoism, and a calculated defence of some well-known interests: the bilateral agreements were necessary in order to save the Swiss economy from faltering. It was essential in order to secure our mobility, practical for our everyday activities – and logically we voted for it. The opposite would have been a surprise. Have we not negotiated for it step by step? Was it not tailor-made for us? Under these circumstances the least we could do was say Yes without turning up our noses.

Federal Referendum

24 September 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

26 November 2000

Subjects not yet decided.

COMMENTARY

The results of the vote leave no room for doubt: by a clear majority the Swiss nation has revoked its embarrassing rejection of the European Economic Area on 6 June 1992, and manifested its willingness to adopt closer ties with Europe. The chosen path is bilateral agreement, which ensures extensive freedom and a full raft of economic benefits for our country. While the Yes vote on 21 May implies no changes at the political level, airline companies, industry in general as well as research institutions will benefit most when the bilateral treaties come into force (probably at the beginning of 2001).

Admittedly the agreement on road transport will open Switzerland's roads up to 40-tonne trucks and present a potential threat to the environment. Yet Switzerland's heavy goods transport tax provides the country with a vehicle which lessens the attractiveness of road transport and, moreover, serves as the main financial source for funding the new railway alpine transversal. Free movement of persons may also give cause for alarm, particularly in terms of wage levels. But the accompanying measures laid down by the Federal Council and approved by social partners should minimise the risks in this respect. Added to this, Swiss nationals will acquire the same rights as EU citizens two years after the agreements come into force. They will be able to move around without restriction, and live and work where they want.

While the resounding Yes was never in doubt in French-speaking Switzerland, it was above all the German-speaking Swiss who tipped the balance; they have changed their minds since rejecting the EEA and decided to open the door to Europe. Finally there was one notable paradox: while all other border cantons approved the treaties by a large majority, residents of Ticino voted against it, thereby endorsing the objections which the Lega had raised against the bilaterals. Ultimately, however, it was the Yes majority who won: the bilateral agreements will also be enacted south of the Alps.

Dario Ballanti