

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 29 (2002)
Heft: 5

Artikel: 22 September 2002 : double defeat for the Federal Council
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906590>

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Double defeat for the Federal Council

ROLF RIBI

The results of the referendum on Sunday 22 September were far from commonplace: voters rejected all three proposals by a narrow majority.

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) gold initiative which proposed using all the National Bank gold reserves for the AHV was rejected by 52.4 percent. Likewise the counterproposal by the Federal Council and parliament which recommended splitting the revenue from the gold three ways between the AHV, the cantons and the Swiss Solidarity Fund, found no favour and was thrown out by 51.8 percent of voters. Neither proposal achieved a majority among the electorate or the cantons. And despite broad-ranging support, the energy market law which proposed controlled liberalisation of the electricity market was rejected by 52.8 percent.

Although the SVP's gold initiative (all gold reserves or their revenue to be used for the AHV) reflected a popular concern, it suffered defeat yet again. The only majority vote in favour of the initiative came from the cantons

of Glarus, Ticino, Schwyz, Thurgau, Aargau and St. Gall. The most emphatic No came from the cantons of Nidwalden, Obwalden, Valais and French-speaking Switzerland, while only Basle City, Jura, Neuchâtel, Geneva, Zurich, Lucerne and Berne voted in favour of the counterproposal and its three-way model.

The Federal Council's energy market law envisaged a controlled deregulation of the electricity market – with flanking measures for small electricity customers, hydroelectricity and other renewable energies. While this proposal was most strongly opposed in French-speaking Switzerland, cantons in eastern Switzerland also voted clearly against energy market deregulation. The Yes votes came mainly from the more urban cantons of German-speaking Switzerland and the energy-producing cantons of central Switzerland.

The Federal Council suffered a third defeat in the canton of Nidwalden, where voters summarily rejected the proposal to construct a special underground cavern in the Wellenberg mountain with a view to burying radioactive waste.

COMMENTARY

Lots of unresolved issues

The Swiss electorate has spoken: three times No. But what do Swiss citizens really want? There are only three certainties:

The Federal Council's bright idea of a new solidarity fund has fizzled out; some of the gold not required by the National Bank is to go towards the AHV; and local public power plants look set to hold onto their position in the Swiss electricity market.

Announced in 1997 by the government, the humanitarian idea of a solidarity fund is now dead. Voters were unable to warm to the idea of the fund for the following reasons: The idea arose at the time of the holocaust debate; the purpose of the fund was never clear; and the status of the main social security plans i.e. the AHV and pension funds is now somewhat uncertain. So what will happen to the gift of CHF 20 billion of national assets? The SVP wants to use two thirds of the gold reserves for the AHV and give one third to the cantons. The FDP and CVP mainly want to reduce the national debt, while the SP wants to use the revenues entirely for promoting business innovation. Whatever the final decision, Switzerland's humanitarian tradition would have benefited from a solidarity fund to stand alongside the Red Cross.

What will happen to the Swiss electricity market is open to question. The only certainty is that the referendum result has damaged confidence in the market's controllability, local monopolies will continue to exist along with their political energy tariffs, large customers will force power discounts for themselves, households will come away empty-handed, and there will be no special measures to protect hydroelectricity and the environment. A complicated law has foundered, and a vital sector of the economy faces an uncertain future.

Rolf Ribi

Federal people's initiative

24 November 2002

- Federal people's initiative "against the abuse of asylum rights"
- Revision of the law on unemployment insurance

Forthcoming referenda 2003

9 Feb. / 18. May / 19 Oct. / 30 Nov.

Results of the Federal Referendums

Canton	National Bank gold reserves for the AHV		Counterproposal "Gold to be divided 3 ways among AHV, cantons and Solidarity Fund"		Energy Market Law (EML)		Turnout %
	YES %	NO %	YES %	NO %	YES %	NO %	
ZH	46.0	54.0	51.0	49.0	50.0	50.0	49.7
BE	47.0	53.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	50.0	41.9
LU	44.0	56.0	50.0	50.0	57.0	43.0	45.4
UR	48.0	52.0	49.0	51.0	53.0	47.0	38.8
SZ	57.0	43.0	39.0	61.0	52.0	48.0	47.7
OW	41.0	59.0	43.0	57.0	57.0	43.0	43.9
NW	40.0	60.0	43.0	57.0	55.0	45.0	68.3
GL	58.0	42.0	38.0	62.0	45.0	55.0	41.0
ZG	43.0	57.0	49.0	51.0	59.0	41.0	54.4
FR	46.0	54.0	48.0	52.0	42.0	58.0	39.7
SO	50.0	50.0	45.0	55.0	49.0	51.0	47.8
BS	46.0	54.0	56.0	44.0	52.0	48.0	52.2
BL	49.0	51.0	48.0	52.0	55.0	45.0	45.8
SH	49.0	51.0	49.0	51.0	47.0	53.0	64.2
AR	49.0	51.0	41.0	59.0	45.0	55.0	49.0
AI	46.0	54.0	36.0	64.0	48.0	52.0	41.4
SG	51.0	49.0	43.0	57.0	48.0	52.0	42.3
GR	48.0	52.0	48.0	52.0	53.0	47.0	38.5
AG	53.0	47.0	42.0	58.0	51.0	49.0	41.5
TG	53.0	47.0	43.0	57.0	47.0	53.0	45.4
TI	57.0	43.0	48.0	52.0	39.0	61.0	36.0
VD	45.0	55.0	48.0	52.0	31.0	69.0	44.9
VS	42.0	58.0	47.0	53.0	42.0	58.0	33.2
NE	43.0	57.0	54.0	46.0	38.0	62.0	50.6
GE	43.0	57.0	52.0	48.0	37.0	63.0	50.4
JU	43.0	57.0	55.0	45.0	35.0	65.0	35.1
Total	48.0	52.0	48.0	52.0	47.0	53.0	43.3