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Victory on a low turnout

On 9 February Swiss voters approved an extension of their referendum rights. It was an important issue, but the response was apathy at the polls.

JUST OVER one-quarter of citizens cast their votes – the 28% turnout was one of the lowest ever. Still, the Federal Council can glean some satisfaction from it: it obtained a 70% majority and won the backing of all the cantons.

Swiss governments rarely win such landslide victories. Now that cantons and people have endorsed this general people's initiative, it can be used as the basis for amending laws rather than just the federal constitution, as at present. The reform also extends the right of referendum to international treaties. This compromise proposal split the political parties. The CVP and FDP supported the proposal, whereas the Socialists and SVP opposed it, arguing that retention of the minimum 100,000 signatures for submitting a general people's initiative diminished the reform's effectiveness.

The second issue up for vote was an urgent law on hospital treatment, based on a judgment of the Federal Insurance Court which resolved a dispute between cantons and health funds. The Court had ordered the cantons to contribute to costs incurred by patients who receive supplementary benefits for private or semi-private treatment. The arrears for this amount to CHF 700 million a year. To save the cantons having to pay this sum immediately, parliament drafted a "political" compromise which spreads payments over several years. The health fund Assura initiated the referendum against this solution but won only 22.65% of the votes cast.

Pablo Crivelli 

Translated from the Italian.

Federal Referendum

18 May 2003

- Revision of the Federal Law on the Army and Military Administration (Army XXI)
- Federal Law on the Protection of the Population and Civil Defence
- People's Initiative "Yes to fair rents"
- People's Initiative "for one car-free Sunday per season – a 4-year trial (Sunday Initiative)"
- People's Initiative "Healthcare must be affordable (Health Initiative)"
- People's Initiative "Equal rights for the disabled"
- People's Initiative "Non-nuclear energy – for an energy reform and the gradual decommissioning of nuclear power plants (non-nuclear energy)"
- People's Initiative "Moratorium Plus – for an extension of the moratorium on nuclear power plant construction and a reduction of the nuclear risk (MoratoriumPlus)"
- People's Initiative "for adequate vocational training (apprenticeship initiative)"

Forthcoming referendum dates

2003

19 October / 30 November

Results of the Federal Referendums

Canton	People's Rights		Hospital costs		Turnout in %
	YES%	No%	YES%	NO%	
ZH	66.9	33.1	79.0	21.0	32.6
BE	74.4	25.6	78.8	21.2	23.7
LU	73.6	26.4	80.3	19.7	28.9
UR	57.3	42.7	70.6	29.4	31.3
SZ	63.0	37.0	73.6	26.4	36.4
OW	66.8	33.2	78.7	21.3	25.6
NW	70.9	29.1	77.2	22.8	28.4
GL	56.8	43.2	75.9	24.1	19.0
ZG	72.8	27.2	79.6	20.4	30.5
FR	77.3	22.7	75.5	24.5	21.4
SO	74.0	26.0	76.3	23.7	27.2
BS	75.6	24.4	80.4	19.6	43.2
BL	72.1	27.9	78.7	21.3	28.6
SH	56.2	43.8	77.5	22.5	52.2
AR	65.2	34.8	76.0	24.0	42.9
AI	65.2	34.8	77.3	22.7	22.6
SG	69.4	30.6	74.1	25.9	28.5
GR	70.4	29.6	80.4	19.6	19.5
AG	69.5	30.5	76.1	23.9	24.9
TG	72.9	27.1	76.0	24.0	39.2
TI	65.5	34.5	75.8	24.2	19.6
VD	75.2	24.8	69.6	30.4	30.5
VS	62.6	37.4	73.7	26.3	14.8
NE	77.2	22.8	80.4	19.6	38.7
GE	64.6	35.4	83.6	16.4	36.1
JU	75.2	24.8	72.0	28.0	21.2
Total	70.3	29.7	77.4	22.6	28.2

COMMENTARY

Not a healthy sign

The 9 February poll was preceded by a public debate which could be described as lacklustre or even non-existent. But there is no escaping the significance of the result: one of the lowest turnouts ever recorded in Switzerland augurs badly for the future of direct democracy. In fact, one reason why Parliament wanted to extend referendum rights was to raise civic awareness among the people of Switzerland. The result is the opposite of what was hoped for. The stakes were high, involving an extension of the people's rights which make Switzerland a "special case" among democracies.

Although the general people's initiative hardly revolutionises referendum rights, the majority of voters who turned out (i.e. the most motivated) clearly endorsed the proposal, reasoning that any extension to referendum rights could not possibly do any harm. But the low turnout highlighted one of Switzerland's many paradoxes: the Swiss claim a high regard for the inalienable right to launch people's initiatives and referenda. At the same time, it seems they only turn out to vote if the issues referred to them raise important questions or are thought crucial to the country's future.

Interesting issues are not enough in themselves to mobilise the electorate. Without the commitment of the Federal Council, political parties and major organisations, the average voter's civic awareness remains more or less dormant. The approved reform will not therefore solve the problem of apathy at the polls. Introducing even more channels of direct democracy is not the way to encourage citizens to vote. Instead, more intelligent use should be made of those already available. Perhaps raising the minimum number of signatures would be one way of limiting referenda to major issues and giving the electorate time to vote with a proper understanding of the issues at stake.

Pablo Crivelli