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Voters say No to Federal Council and parliament



Voters were bombarded with campaigns ahead of the referendum.

On 16 May, following an intensive referendum campaign, Swiss voters overwhelmingly rejected all three proposals by the Federal Council and parliament.

ROLF RIBI

67.9 percent said No to the revision of the Old Age and Survivors' Insurance (Alters- und Hinterlassenenversicherung, AHV), 68.6 percent rejected the proposal to increase VAT to shore up the AHV and IV (invalidity insurance), and 65.9 percent threw out the fiscal package with tax concessions.


No-one expected the three federal proposals on social and fiscal policy to be so soundly defeated in all 26 cantons. The sober Neue Zürcher Zeitung newspaper wrote of a "real slap in the face for the Federal Council". At 50.3 percent, turnout was

significantly higher than the average recorded in recent years.

The aim of 11th revision of the AHV was to inject some CHF 925 million a year into the country's most important social security mechanism by raising the pensionable age for women to 65, modifying benefits for widows and orphans, and indexing the cost-of-living rate for pensions to price and salary trends every three years instead of every two. Almost 68 percent of voters rejected this social cutback, with the canton of Jura giving the most resounding No (86.4 percent).

The proposal to raise VAT by 0.8 percent in favour of invalidity insurance with effect from 2005, and by 1 percent in favour of the AHV by 2009 at the earliest, was given an even clearer thumbs-down. Opponents dubbed this move "tax stockpiling" – unfairly, since parliament and voters would have had the last word on this amendment. Here, too, the canton of Jura turned in the highest No vote (81.1 percent).

The tax package, which would have cost government and cantons some CHF 2.5 billion in direct federal taxes, was the most controversial issue of all. The aim was to introduce tax concessions for families, married couples and home owners, and abolish sales tax on securities trading. For various reasons, this package of measures was rejected by 65.9 percent of voters – most notably by the western Swiss cantons of Jura and Valais.

The Social Democrats, the unions, the Greens and, in particular, the cantons emerged as winners on this early-summer referendum Sunday: For the first time in the history of our federal state, eleven cantons launched a referendum against a tax package which impinged on their cantonal tax sovereignty and would have been a severe drain on their cantonal finances. And the losers? Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin frankly admitted that "This is a defeat for right-wing parties and a double defeat for the Federal Council and parliament." 

Translated from German.

COMMENTARY

Stalemate

Things are going nowhere in federal politics: No to reduced AHV benefits, No to higher VAT to pay for AHV and invalidity insurance, and No to a package of tax concessions for married couples, families and home owners. The Swiss electorate rejected all three proposals by the Federal Council and parliament in all 26 cantons by a majority of two thirds. The triple No on 16 May follows on from the triple No on 8 February (Avanti initiative). So in its first year of office, the newly elected Federal Council has already been defeated at the ballot box six times. Following a swing to the right in the federal parliament and subsequently the Federal Council, many observers suspected that politics would be dominated by the right wing. So far, however, there is little sign of it. "We are the people," is the war-cry of citizens in Switzerland, where politics have suddenly become much more interesting.

"We are facing a highly politicised Switzerland," declared political scientist Claude Longchamp on the evening of the referendum. Indeed: even in the run-up to this referendum Sunday, the issues were being hotly discussed and promoted the length and breadth of the country. "Save the AHV!" exclaimed bills posted by right-wing parties. "Hands off the AHV!" warned stickers posted by left-wing parties. While this revival of political awareness is a positive trend, the apparent inability of the "class politique" to introduce reforms gives cause for concern. Taxes or social mechanisms, transport or health: the will to formulate solutions that are acceptable to the majority is lacking.

What can be done? The Federal Council and parliament must draw up policies that better address the people's needs. Larger political parties must pay closer heed to their grass-roots members. Economic and business groups must rethink their radical positions. And following the first cantonal referendum in the history of the federal state, the Federal Council must seek a new dialogue with the cantons. **Rolf Ribi**