

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 42 (2015)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Heavy defeats at the ballot box
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907098>

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Heavy defeats at the ballot box

An ethically fraught proposal

Interior minister Alain Berset has been candid in saying the debate surrounding the popular initiative on pre-implantation diagnostics (PID) will “not be easy”. His concern is that Parliament has significantly expanded the bill that the Federal Council originally presented. In essence, couples who are genetically predisposed to having children at risk of a severe hereditary disease will be able to use PID. In practice this means that, when undergoing artificial insemination, they can have the embryos screened for this disease to ensure only embryos unaffected by the disorder can be used for reproduction. However, it will still be prohibited to screen embryos for conditions that spontaneously arise, such as Down’s syndrome.

Parliament wants to go much further now and allow chromosome screening for all couples undergoing artificial insemination. The original bill would have allowed a few dozen cases per year. If the parliamentary version becomes law, however, that figure would be several thousands. Opposition has thus increased significantly. The bill must in any case clear two hurdles. On 14 June, the electorate will vote on a constitutional amendment that would in principle allow embryo testing. This enjoyed broad support in Parliament. Only later on will a vote be held on the highly controversial law codifying the exact application. If voters give the green light to a constitutional amendment on 14 June, the period for submitting a referendum will begin. A referendum is very likely: the Evangelical People’s Party (EVP) has indicated its intention to call one.

Harmonisation of grants

Anyone needing a grant for attending a higher technical college, university of applied sciences, technical university or another university should have the same opportunities. Currently that depends on the canton, a state of affairs the Swiss association of students (VSS) claims is “unfair”. So it is promoting an initiative to harmonise the awarding of grants for tertiary education and therefore shift legal powers from cantonal to federal level. Grants must also guarantee a minimum standard of living during a recognised initial tertiary education. The VSS believes having clear rules on grants will help alleviate the skills shortage.

The Federal Council and Parliament have rejected the initiative, but support its focus. To ease some of the pressure, the Education Grant Act has been fully revised through an indirect counterproposal. This draft has already been passed by Parliament, but has not been put to the vote. The change in the law will not affect the existing powers of the federal government and cantons, but the federal government will support the cantons in harmonising the grants system. Specifically, cantons will only receive a federal contribution if they sign up to the grants agreement. As requested by the VSS, the agreement sets nationwide principles and minimum standards.

Two parties failed miserably with proposals on key issues at the referendum held on 8 March – the Swiss Green Liberal Party (GLP) with its “Energy tax instead of VAT” initiative and the Christian Democratic People’s Party with its “Strengthen families! Tax-free child and educational allowances” initiative. Both proposals were intended to boost their parties’ election campaigns but ultimately flopped.

The GLP idea of abolishing VAT in favour of a tax on non-renewable energies was overwhelmingly opposed with 92 percent against. This is an historic defeat: only once, in 1929, has a popular initiative won less support. The outcome shows that combining the issue of energy with the tax system was ill-fated. The VAT system is firmly established in the minds of the Swiss public. The crushing defeat of the GLP’s very first popular initiative represents a major setback for the recently established party which is accustomed to success. It remains to be seen whether the previously broad support enjoyed by the Federal Council’s steering tax relating to the turnaround in energy policy will now come under pressure owing to this referendum result.

The CVP also has to come to terms with a bitter defeat. Its initiative too was resoundingly rejected with 75.4 % of “No” votes. Financial considerations, above all, may have played a major role. The adoption of the initiative would have resulted in tax deficits of around a billion Swiss francs for federal government, the cantons and the communes.

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