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Surprisingly clear rejection of implementing initiative

Almost 60 % of voters rejected the SVP's implementing initiative following an unprecedented campaign. The law on foreign nationals will nevertheless be tightened up.

BARBARA ENGEL

The electorate attached great importance to the referenda on 28 February and to the implementing initiative put forward by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) in particular. This is clearly underlined by the 63.1% turnout which is the highest since the vote on the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992.

However, nobody expected that the implementing initiative would be so resoundingly rejected with 58.9% of voters and 20 cantons against it. A majority were still in favour of the initiative at the end of January, according to an official poll.

More than one million Swiss francs collected

The change of mood was brought about by an unprecedented campaign in which creative artists, former federal councillors, MPs, young people, over 150 Swiss professors of law and even bishops took part. In excess of 1.2 million Swiss francs were collected through crowdfunding. This enabled the opposition to achieve as much media presence as the SVP which supported the proposal. A wide range of arguments against the initiative were put forward and the mobilisation of the electorate was a resounding success. The SVP's isolationist tendencies may have proven unappetising to large sections of the population as the party's demands call into question even the fundamental principles of the constitutional state, such as the separation of powers.

Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga, who is federal minister of justice, appealed to people to vote to protect the constitutional state on the evening of the referendum. Sommaruga said that it was "a sign of maturity and democratic responsibility" that the electorate decided "they did not wish to take over the role of Parliament and the courts".

Many more deportations

After the rejection of the implementing initiative, the law on the deportation initiative adopted by Parliament, which the Swiss people accepted in November 2010, will now enter into force on 1 October 2016. Under the law, foreign nationals convicted of serious crimes will be automatically deported. The expulsion lasts for between 5 and 15 years irrespective of the severity of the sentence. However, the courts can refrain from imposing deportation in exceptional circumstances in the event of serious personal hardship. The SVP announced that it would keep a close eye on how this hardship provision was applied exactly. It anticipates that around 4,000 foreigners will be deported from Switzerland each year in future. That figure currently stands at around 500.

Second Gotthard tunnel on the way, "marriage penalty" retained

There were no surprises amongst the other referenda on 28 February. The result of the vote on the marriage penalty was nevertheless tight.

57% voted in favour of the proposal permitting the construction of a second road tunnel at the Gotthard. This should soften the impact of the renovation of the existing tunnel. Supporters of the initiative – with Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard at the forefront – played up the importance of security and national cohesion during the referendum campaign. Opponents highlighted the high costs and the fact that the second tunnel would increase road capacity enormously, hampering road-to-rail transfer and leading to the use of two lanes in two tunnels in future in an extreme scenario. On the evening of the referendum Federal Councillor Leuthard gave assurances that this would not happen as the protection of the Alps was enshrined in the federal constitution.

The CVP and the definition of marriage

The CVP's initiative on the abolition of the "marriage penalty" – officially known as "for marriage and families" – was rejected but just 50.8% voted

no. This is despite the fact that the Federal Supreme Court declared fiscally disadvantaging married couples to be unconstitutional in 1984. Opponents warned of high costs during the referendum campaign and demonstrated that the "marriage penalty" only affects high earning married couples. They also used the definition of marriage as a permanent "union of man and woman" as a further reason for rejecting the proposal. Opponents argued that this definition contradicted efforts to open up marriage to same-sex couples.

Resounding rejection of Young Socialists' initiative

Speculation on the rise and fall of food prices will not be prohibited in Switzerland. The "no speculation on food" initiative was clearly rejected – with 59.9% opposed – as expected. 40% voting in favour is nevertheless a respectable achievement from the perspective of those on the left and the Greens.

BARBARA ENGEL