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Swiss voters buck the green trend

Switzerland is veering from its set course on climate change. Voters have rejected the beefed-up CO₂ Act, making the goals of the Paris Agreement even harder to achieve.

THEODORA PETER

The CO₂ Act – actually quite a stereotypically Swiss piece of compromise legislation – appeared to have broad-based support following the gains made by the green parties at the national elections. However, the electorate rejected the bill’s measures to reduce harmful emissions, with 51.6 per cent voting no in the 13 June referendum. A narrow majority evidently balked at the idea of having to dig deeper into their pockets for airline tickets and car fuel. However, push-back also came from elements of the youth climate movement who said that the measures did not go far enough in the fight against climate change. The CO₂ Act failed not least because the FDP was unable to persuade its liberal voter base to endorse green levies and government inter-

vention. FDP leader Petra Gösli, who had steered her party in an environmentally friendly course (see edition 5/2020 of “Swiss Review”), announced her resignation the day after the vote, but denied that her departure had anything to do with the result.

Environment Minister Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) has been left to pick up the pieces. “The proposal probably had too many elements and was easier to attack as a result,” she explained after the vote. On the other hand, the Federal Councillor did not interpret the result as a flat no to more climate protection, despite it now being “very difficult” to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement. Switzerland has pledged to halve harmful greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 and become carbon-neutral by 2050. “It will be

almost impossible to achieve this without additional measures,” Sommaruga said. The environment minister has set her sights in the short term on promoting the less controversial elements of the bill, such as companies being exempted from the CO₂ levy if they invest in environmentally friendly solutions.

Hopes rest on the Glacier Initiative

Supporters of the CO₂ Act are now pinning their hopes on the “Glacier Initiative”. This proposal, submitted back in November 2019, aims to write the Paris Agreement goals into the Constitution and outlaw the use of fossil fuels such as gas, oil and coal. The initiative is backed by environmental groups as well as representatives of all the political parties – except the SVP, which campaigned against the CO₂ Act.

Parliament will debate the initiative and any counterproposal over the next few months before voters can have their say. Furthermore, the Federal Council has raised the prospect of a proposal to promote domestic and renewable energy.

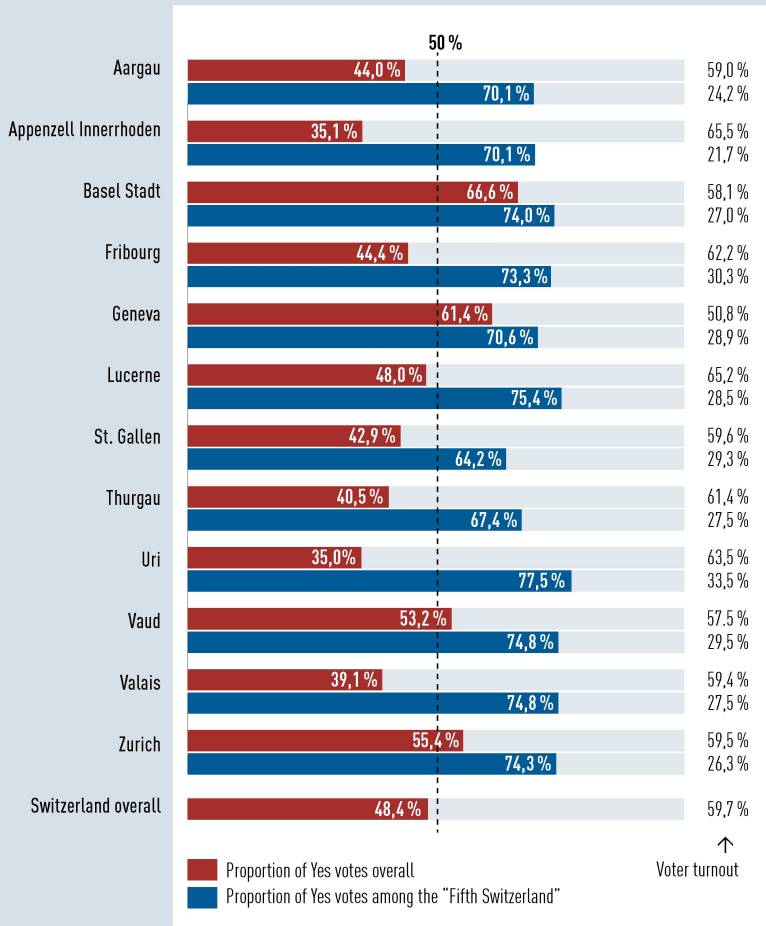
The left-green parties and the climate movement are targeting banks and insurance companies, saying that environmentally damaging investments ultimately make the financial sector one of the biggest drivers of the climate crisis. Whether a popular initiative would be launched remained to be seen at the time of going to press. The Young Greens, for their part, are trying to attract support for an “environmental responsibility initiative”

Protests from youth climate activists (like the ones here in Berne) left the majority of voters unmoved, with the electorate rejecting the CO₂ Act – the most important element in Swiss climate policy to date.

Photo: Marc Lettau



An emphatic yes from the “Fifth Switzerland”



Unlike the domestic electorate, the Swiss Abroad were clearly in favour of the CO₂ Act. In ten out of the 12 cantons that actually record votes from the “Fifth Switzerland” separately, over 70 per cent of Swiss Abroad voted for the CO₂ Act (see our table). In the canton of Uri, where the proposal flopped with a mere 35,0 per cent support, a record 77,5 per cent of voters from the “Fifth Switzerland” said yes to the new legislation.

To coincide with the dispatch of voting papers for the 13 June vote, the federal government conducted a survey among around 1,600 Swiss Abroad in Australia, Brazil and Thailand. To test alternative methods of dispatch, half of respondents received voting papers via their local embassy, while the other half received their documents the conventional way by post. The results of the trial and the findings of the survey were still outstanding at the time of going to press. (TP)

to protect the world’s natural resources. However, a lot of precious time will be lost before plebiscites like this are put to the people. Switzerland has done relatively well on climate protection until now, compared to other countries. In the an-

nual Climate Change Performance Index, it moved up two places to 14th position at the end of 2020. Defeat for the CO₂ Act has now seriously dented Swiss ambitions in the fight against climate change. <https://gletscher-initiative.ch>

Overview of all the other poll results on 13 June:

Double no to the “clean drinking water” and “pesticide” initiatives

The use of pesticides in agriculture will not be banned. The electorate rejected both the “clean drinking water initiative” and the “pesticide initiative”, with around 61 per cent voting no in both cases. Opposition was particularly strong in rural areas. The majority of voters from the “Fifth Switzerland” approved both initiatives.

Yes to the Anti-Terror Act

The police now have greater powers to act pre-emptively against people who pose a terrorist or violent-extremist threat. Around 57 per cent of voters gave their backing to the Federal Act on Police Counterterrorism Measures.

Yes to the Covid-19 Act

Voters support the federal government’s stance on the coronavirus, with 60 per cent having approved the Covid-19 Act at the polls. In particular, the legislation – in force until the end of the year – regulates measures to support companies and self-employed individuals affected by the pandemic.