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Switzerland aims to become carbon-neutral by 2050

A clear majority of the Swiss electorate, almost 60 per cent, voted in favour of the Climate and Innovation Act on 18 June 2023. The new legislation cements the gradual shift away from fossil fuels like oil and gas. But a new debate is brewing over zero-carbon alternatives.

THEODORA PETER

“Switzerland has set itself an ambitious target,” said Federal Councillor Albert Rösti (SVP) after the vote. The energy and environment minister – who only joined the government in January – had campaigned for the parliament-approved Climate and Innovation Act against the will of his own party. Insisting that the switch from oil and gas endangers the security of Switzerland’s energy supplies, the SVP had initiated the 18 June referendum against what it called the “energy-guzzling act”. However, a majority of voters followed the yes recommendation of all the other parties, with 59.1 per cent endorsing the target of carbon neutrality by 2050. Among the Swiss Abroad approval of this target was as high as 76.8 per cent.

Boost for renewable energy

Under the Climate and Innovation Act, businesses, road users, and private households will be incentivised to help slash harmful greenhouse gas emissions over the next three decades. Massive investment in zero-carbon technology will be needed. To this end, parliament has approved financial support – totalling 3.2 billion Swiss francs

– for homeowners to replace climate-damaging oil and gas heating with heat pumps. Electric vehicles will replace petrol and diesel on the roads, while industrial and commercial businesses will have to transition to climate-friendly production practices.

According to Rösti, Switzerland can only reach the net-zero target by producing more of its own electricity. “We cannot simply rely on imports,” he said. Rösti hopes parliament will approve the Federal Act on a Secure Electricity Supply in September. This new bill aims to promote hydro, solar and wind. But political opinion is divided on the extent to which new dams, wind turbines, or solar plants should be allowed to affect wildlife and natural landscape. Depending on the outcome of the parliamentary debate, this matter could also end in a referendum.

Calls for new nuclear power stations

The centre-right and right-wing parties as well as industry groups are sceptical as to whether renewables can meet Switzerland’s electricity needs in future. There had already been calls as early as the day of the vote for new nuclear power plants to be built. According to the FDP and

The Climate and Innovation Act lends additional impetus to new major solar and wind projects. Opinion is divided on the extent to which such projects should be allowed to affect wildlife and the natural landscape. In the photo: Europe’s highest wind park, overlooking Lake Gries (canton of Valais) near the Nufenen Pass.

Photo: Keystone



SVP, it would be careless to dispense with “climate-friendly” energy from nuclear fission. However, the construction of new nuclear power stations has been banned under Swiss law since 2017, when the electorate accepted the revised Federal Energy Act (“Energy Strategy 2050”), which incorporated Switzerland’s withdrawal from nuclear energy production.

Yet the speed of climate change and fears over electricity supplies could lead to a rethink – or at least delay the shift from nuclear. SVP Federal Councillor Rösti advocates keeping the country’s existing nuclear power plants on-line for as long as possible – “as long as safety is guaranteed”. But this would necessitate some costly retrofitting. It remains to be seen whether nuclear power plant operators would want to make such an investment. Energy group BKW took the Mühleberg nuclear plant offline in 2019, simply because running it was no longer economical.

Nuclear is an issue likely to preoccupy the electorate again in a few years’ time. The centre-right and right-wing parties are collecting signatures for a popular initiative dubbed “Stop the blackout”, which aims to reverse the current ban on new nuclear power stations and make “all climate-friendly types” of electricity generation admissible under the constitution. Sceptical left-wing politicians have dismissed the initiative as “ideological cloud-cuckoo land”. There will be no power shortages in winter if we develop renewables as planned, says energy politician and SP National Councillor Roger Nordmann. In addition to hydro and wind, the left-green parties believe there is huge untapped potential in solar installations on buildings.

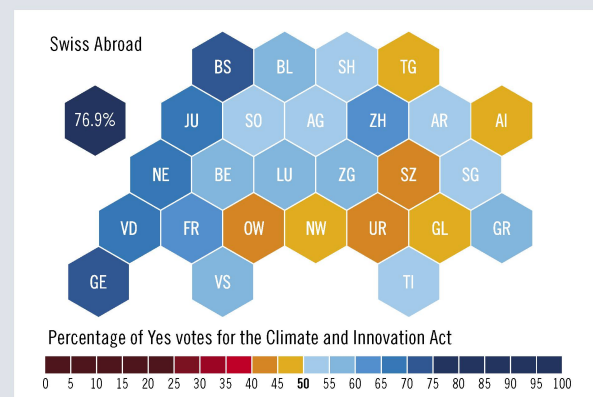
Climate Alliance wants greater urgency

The outcome of the 18 June vote is a triumph for the Climate Alliance. Buoyed by the yes result, this cross-party association now expects Switzerland to “raise its ambitions”. The climate activists want greater urgency, especially with regard to the proposed revision of the CO₂ Act. The bill, which is currently being considered by parliament, is not enough for Switzerland to meet its climate goals on time, they say, adding that financial services must also play their part. Swiss banks should force “climate-destroying multinationals” to rethink and change. The Climate Alliance intends to drive home its message at a climate protest on the Bundesplatz in Berne on 30 September – three weeks before the federal election.

Voters again followed the recommendations of the government and parliament (see diagram on the right), when two other proposals were put to the people on 18 June – the last day of popular votes in this election year. They approved the introduction of a global minimum tax for multinationals as well as a precautionary extension to the Covid-19 Act until the end of 2024.

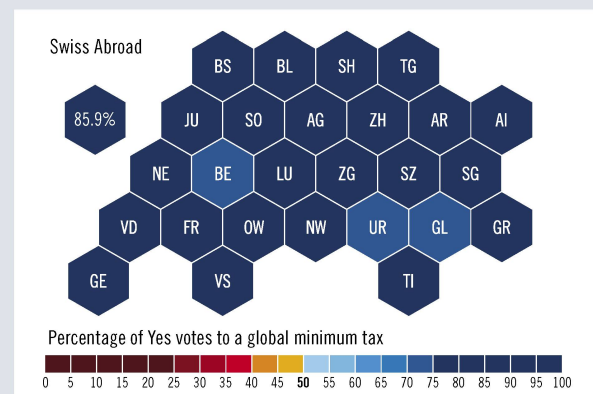
Yes to the Climate and Innovation Act

A majority of 59.1 per cent voted in favour of the Federal Act on Climate Protection Targets, Innovation and Strengthening Energy Security, which aims to make Switzerland carbon-neutral by 2050.



Yes to a global minimum tax

A majority of 78.5 per cent backed the introduction of a global minimum tax on large multinational companies, which will see Switzerland implementing OECD/G20 recommendations.



Yes to extending the Covid-19 Act

A majority of 61.9 per cent approved extending the Covid-19 Act on a precautionary basis until the end of 2024. This means that the Covid vaccine passport requirement can still be reactivated, if necessary, e.g. for travel to other countries.

