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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo / Chisholm, N.
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Switzerland says Yes to the UN

PABLO CRIVELLI

Switzerland is to become the 190th member of the United Nations. On 3 March 54.6% of voters decided in favour of membership.

EXPERTS WERE ALMOST unanimous in predicting a majority vote from the electorate. But the state majority was uncertain right up to the last minute, and turned the Sunday referendum into a cliff-hanger. At the end of the day the initiative was accepted by a hair's-breadth cantonal majority of 12 to 11.

Apart from a few surprises, the predictions of experts were confirmed: the cantons of central and Eastern Switzerland as well as the Ticino rejected the proposal. As expected, Western Switzerland gave a resounding thumbs-up, despite the narrow

Yes majority from the Valais (51.5 percent or a majority of only 2700 votes).

Since 1891 only thirteen popular initiatives have been accepted, which is indicative of how difficult it is to carry a proposal without broad-based political support. Witness the massive thumbs-down given to the popular initiative by the Swiss Trades Union Association for shorter working hours: it was rejected by all cantons by a majority ranging between 58 percent (JU) and 89.6 percent (AI).

At 57.5 percent, the average turnout was the highest since the referendum on joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992.



The UN building in Geneva.

Results of the Federal Referendums

Canton	UN		Working week		Turnout in %
	YES%	NO%	YES%	NO%	
ZH	59.8	40.2	25.6	74.4	59.4
BE	56.4	43.6	23.4	76.6	57.1
LU	51.5	48.5	19.0	81.0	66.4
UR	40.3	59.7	18.8	81.2	59.4
SZ	38.9	61.1	15.6	84.4	68.6
OW	45.4	54.6	15.0	85.0	66.6
NW	46.5	53.5	15.0	85.0	69.0
GL	39.4	60.6	16.7	83.3	59.7
ZG	55.2	44.8	19.7	80.3	67.7
FR	59.2	40.8	31.2	68.8	56.0
SO	52.9	47.1	23.5	76.5	61.4
BS	64.1	35.9	31.3	68.7	62.8
BL	58.8	41.2	24.5	75.5	59.4
SH	45.4	54.6	24.8	75.2	72.6
AR	45.5	54.5	18.3	81.7	66.0
AI	32.5	67.5	10.4	89.6	66.1
SG	46.5	53.5	19.8	80.2	61.8
GR	45.6	54.4	19.6	80.4	55.9
AG	48.9	51.1	21.6	78.4	58.1
TG	43.2	56.8	17.5	82.5	58.8
TI	41.3	58.7	37.6	62.4	49.8
VD	63.5	36.5	34.0	66.0	46.5
VS	51.5	48.5	23.3	76.7	49.4
NE	65.2	34.8	38.2	61.8	65.9
GE	66.9	33.1	38.5	61.5	60.3
JU	63.1	36.9	42.0	58.0	53.8
Total	54.6	45.4	25.4	74.6	57.5

80 percent Yes from the Fifth Switzerland

The cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Lucerne register the votes of their expatriate voters separately. In the canton of Lucerne, 78.4 percent of expatriates voted Yes to UN membership. In the canton of Geneva, the seat of the UN, 78.2 percent of Swiss Abroad voted Yes, while in Vaud 82.3 percent of Swiss Abroad approved the proposal. Compared to the overall results (Lucerne 51.5 percent, Geneva 66.9 percent and Vaud 63.5 percent Yes majority), the Fifth Switzerland's clear approval is well above the national average.

OSA

COMMENTARY

We remain neutral

UN opponents complained that by voting for UN membership, Swiss voters would give up their integral neutrality – their “splendid isolation”. In reality this integral neutrality, if indeed it ever existed, has been non-existent since the early 1990s. This was when the Federal Council decided to impose economic sanctions against Iraq and ex-Yugoslavia and effectively participate in the UN security system.

Swiss voters proved their logical thinking on 3 March: UN membership is merely the logical consequence of the vote in favour of sending armed Swiss soldiers on peacekeeping missions abroad. The majority of the electorate approved this foreign policy pursued by the Federal Council after the end of the Cold War, thereby correcting a situation which many regarded as an anomaly.

What swung the pendulum towards a Yes was not only the new international context, but more importantly the Federal Council's assurances regarding neutrality; because although this foreign policy instrument is increasingly turning into an empty formula, it is dear to Swiss hearts. Sensitive to this psyche, the government repeatedly stressed that UN membership and Swiss neutrality were compatible. Naturally the UN opponents did not share this opinion. Although they had to accept defeat, they succeeded in persuading over a million voters, mainly in rural regions.

In any case, UN opponents can continue to rest easy: the Federal Council will practise a policy of moderation within the UN and concentrate on traditional areas such as development aid. On motions to impose economic sanctions, Berne will follow the majority; and when it comes to military sanctions, Switzerland will abstain.

Pablo Crivelli

Translated from the German by N. Chisholm