

2 June 2002 : Yes to first-trimester abortion

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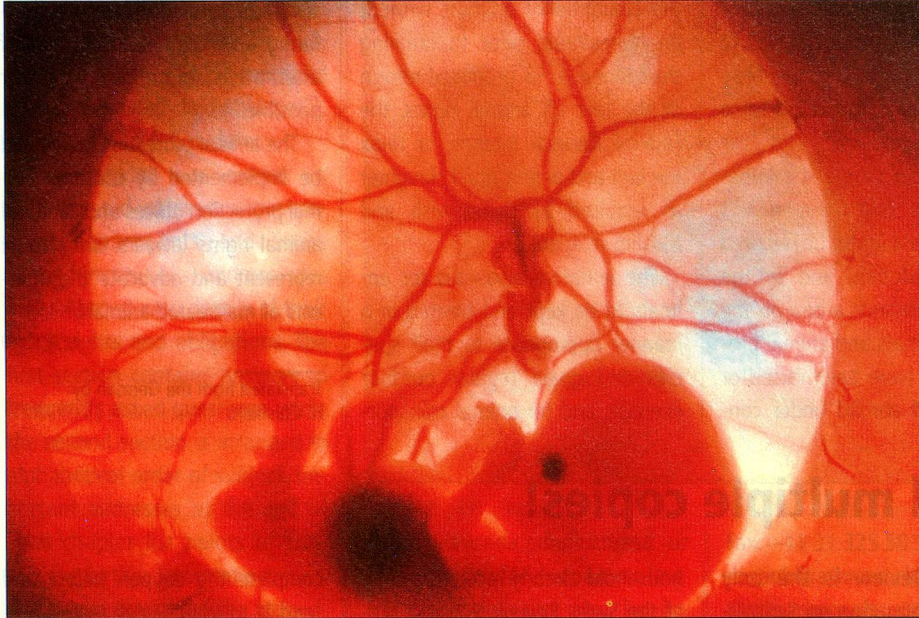
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Yes to first-trimester abortion



Keystone

Controversial issue: At what point does an embryo become a life form?

Swiss voters have expressed a clear opinion on the delicate issue of abortion. By an overwhelming majority they voted in favour of parliament's proposal to decriminalise abortion in the first trimester, and rejected the initiative "For mother and child".

Over 70 percent of voters accepted parliament's proposal to decriminalise abortion and permit termination under clearly defined conditions. The Protestant cantons of western Switzerland gave the clearest thumbs-up, with Geneva 87.8 percent in favour, Vaud 85.7 percent and Neuchâtel 85.4 percent. Only two cantons rejected this amendment in the law, for which no cantonal majority was required: Appenzell Innerrhoden by 60.1 percent and Valais by 54.1 percent.

The initiative "For mother and child", which called for a virtually total ban on abortion even in cases of rape, turned out a fiasco and was rejected by every single canton and more than four-fifths of voters. The clearest thumbs-down came from the cantons of Geneva (with only 11.8 percent voting Yes), Vaud (13 percent Yes) and Basle Country (13.5 percent Yes), while the best results were chalked up in Valais (32.2 per-

cent) and Uri (29.9 percent). Turnout was 41 percent. PAT

Canton	Legalised first trimester abortion		Initiative "For mother and child"		Turnout in %
	YES%	No%	YES%	NO%	
ZH	77.5	22.5	14.6	85.4	44.0
BE	73.5	26.5	19.1	80.9	37.5
LU	60.1	39.9	23.5	76.5	48.7
UR	50.7	49.3	29.9	70.1	35.7
SZ	57.3	42.6	25.2	74.8	47.0
OW	56.4	43.7	25.9	74.0	42.8
NW	63.1	36.9	20.7	79.3	45.7
GL	70.8	29.2	17.9	82.1	44.0
ZG	70.8	29.2	16.4	83.6	49.8
FR	71.1	28.9	18.7	81.3	34.2
SO	70.0	29.9	17.5	82.5	47.8
BS	81.8	18.3	15.0	85.0	48.3
BL	79.8	20.2	13.5	86.5	42.0
SH	67.4	32.6	22.7	77.3	63.3
AR	65.1	34.9	19.8	80.2	45.0
AI	39.9	60.1	29.9	70.1	37.0
SG	58.8	41.2	23.8	76.2	39.9
GR	63.8	36.2	22.9	77.1	35.4
AG	68.9	31.1	18.2	81.8	35.7
TG	59.8	40.2	24.4	75.6	40.6
TI	63.2	36.9	23.7	76.3	26.5
VD	85.7	14.3	13.0	87.0	48.4
VS	45.9	54.1	32.2	67.8	31.7
NE	85.4	14.6	13.9	86.1	52.7
GE	87.8	12.2	11.8	88.2	51.6
JU	68.3	31.7	20.7	79.3	30.7
Total	72.2	27.8	18.3	81.7	41.2

COMMENTARY

Closing the gap between law and practice

A victory for rights: not so much the right to abortion in particular but the fundamental rights of society in general. The results of the federal referendum of 2 June put the seal on three decades of ongoing legal uncertainty. While the morals and reality of abortion have radically changed since the late 1960s, the law itself has never been revised. As a result, the referendum on 2 June reflected a legal rather than a political sea-change in Switzerland. Little or nothing has actually changed with regard to abortion. The only difference is that the law now permits abortion within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy at a woman's request, provided she claims that it constitutes an emotional emergency and discusses the situation in detail with her doctor. While this solution is regarded by some as an effective elimination of all constraints on abortion, others would have preferred more in-depth counselling for women seeking abortion, and yet others accept the new regulation but find it excessively bureaucratic.

Everyone is entitled to an opinion. The subject is extremely delicate and complex, and there is no simple solution to the problems surrounding abortion. Swiss voters responded in a highly pragmatic way to the two proposals submitted for vote. On the one hand they clearly rejected the fundamentalism of groups who had campaigned for a ban on abortion even for victims of rape; on the other hand they brought the law into line with reality. Instead of sticking with the present ban on abortion which does not convict "offenders", they voted for a clear, practicable regulatory framework.

There is probably no-one who regards the proposal recommended by parliament and accepted by voters as ideal. Then again, can there ever be an ideal, collective solution to the delicate and "private" issue of abortion? Certainly not. On 2 June a clear majority agreed on a compromise. It is another of those compromises which calls on all the resources of our political system and allows contentious issues to be resolved by catering to the sensibilities of everyone – or almost everyone.

Pierre-André Tschanz