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A definitive Yes to the free movement of persons

The electorate gave their approval to the continuation of the free movement of persons with the European Union by a much clearer margin than expected. They also agreed to extend the agreement to Bulgaria and Rumania. With a 51% turnout, 60% voted Yes at the ballot box. By René Lenzin

The issue of Europe continues to mobilise voters. On 8 February, the turnout for a federal referendum exceeded the 50% mark for the first time since September 2005. Both these referenda were on the free movement of persons. In the first, the electorate approved the extension of the agreement to the ten eastern and southern European countries that had just joined the EU. This time around, they agreed to the continuation of the agreement and its extension to Bulgaria and Rumania. The gradual introduction of the free movement of persons with the two latest EU members is set to begin on 1 April at the earliest with a seven-year transitional period.

The endorsement was more resounding than polls had suggested beforehand. 59.6% of the electorate voted Yes and only the four cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden, Glarus, Schwyz and Ticino rejected the proposals. The proportion of Yes votes in French-speaking Switzerland and in the urban areas of German-speaking Switzerland was high, in keeping with tradition. This time, however, most of the rural cantons of central and eastern Switzerland were also more supportive of a policy of openness than before (see map).

The referendum was necessary because Switzerland and the EU had only signed the

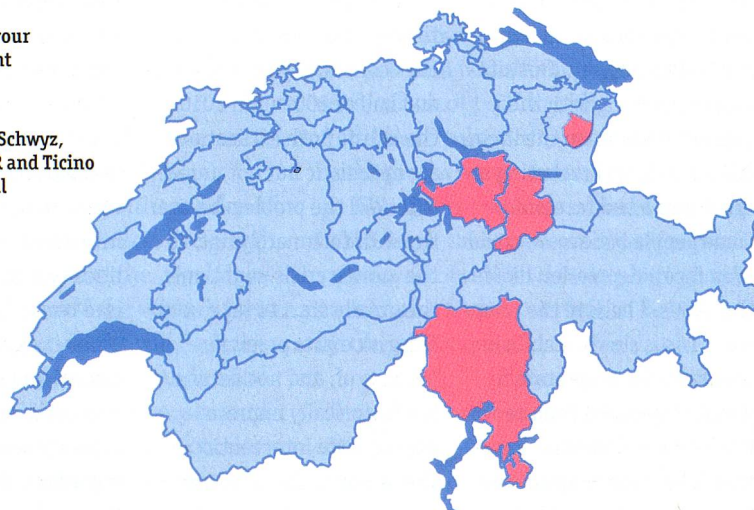
agreement on the free movement of persons for an initial seven years. When Parliament linked the continuation of the agreement to the extension to Bulgaria and Rumania, various right-wing parties successfully campaigned for a referendum. Approval by the people definitively enshrines into law not just the free movement of persons but also the six associated agreements from the first round of bilateral negotiations. These govern issues such as land and air traffic, the recognition of qualifications and the removal of trade barriers.

The fifth Yes to bilateralism

The Federal Council believes the outcome is a victory for Switzerland as a business centre and an affirmation of the bilateral approach. This is actually the fifth time the people have given their approval to agreements concluded between Switzerland and Brussels. In May 2000, 67.2% backed the first bilateral negotiations package. In June 2005, 54.6% agreed to accession to the Schengen and Dublin agreements. In the autumn of the same year, 56% said Yes to extending the free movement of persons to the ten new EU countries. And finally, in November 2006, 53.4% approved cohesion funding of CHF 1 billion for those same countries.

Share of votes in favour of the free movement of persons = 59.6%

Only the cantons of Schwyz, Glarus, Appenzell IR and Ticino rejected the proposal



Comment

Trustworthy Switzerland

If the Swiss people harbour doubts before a referendum, they generally vote No at the ballot box. After the referendum on 8 February, we can therefore safely say there is no longer any doubt whatsoever about the bilateral approach to policy on Europe. Six out of every ten voters backed the continuation of the free movement of persons and its extension to Bulgaria and Rumania – in other words, considerably more people than supported the extension of the agreement to the then ten new EU states a good three years ago.

Such a resounding result was not a foregone conclusion. The gloomy economic situation with the prospect of a lengthy recession pointed to a closer contest. Nevertheless, the people endorsed, for the fifth time, the path that they had marked out back in 1992 when they voted not to enter the European Economic Area (EEA).

The losers of this Referendum Sunday are the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and their prime mover Christoph Blocher. After a confusing series of shifts in position, the party decided to back the No campaign, probably not least as a concession to a party base sceptical of a policy of openness. But the subsequent campaign based on fears of a collapse of the welfare state did not have the desired effect. Back in their day, Blocher and his supporters just managed to prevent Switzerland joining the EEA and forced accession to the EU off the political agenda for many years. However, majority support now eludes them in their efforts to prevent Switzerland gradually drawing closer to the European Union through agreements on individual issues.

The bilateral negotiation process may be a long and sometimes rocky road. But it remains the only approach to policy on Europe that has the backing of the people. If the Federal Council enters into reasonable agreements, it knows it can count on popular support. Some EU governments would be delighted if their own integration policy were as well accepted by the people. This continuity based on direct democracy makes Switzerland a reliable and credible partner for the EU. It also gives the Federal Council the strength to conduct future negotiations with the necessary self-belief.

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