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A referendum has been called

On 11 March, the people and cantons will decide on five proposals concerning book prices, home ownership, landscape conservation, lotteries and more holidays.

By René Lenzin

Parliamentary and Federal Council elections have dominated the political debate in Switzerland for many months. Now, specific political issues are back on the agenda, for both parliamentarians in Berne and the electorate throughout Switzerland. They must decide on five proposals simultaneously on 11 March: three popular initiatives, a parliamentary counterproposal to a popular initiative and a federal law against which a referendum has been called. The adoption of the initiatives and the counterproposal will require the majority support of both the Swiss people and the cantons, while the majority support of just the people will suffice for the law.

"An end to the unrestricted construction of second homes"

This popular initiative from the environmentalist Franz Weber's *Helvetia Nostra* foundation calls for the proportion of second homes to be restricted to 20% of the gross area used for residential purposes per commune. The supporters of the initiative say that second homes are usually empty, have a detrimental effect on the most beautiful mountain landscapes and lead to an uncontrolled rise in property prices. The Federal Council and the majority of parliamentarians reject the initiative because it does not take account of the differing requirements of tourist and non-tourist areas. They want to tackle the issue of second homes with spatial planning measures – a process already launched by federal government, the cantons and many communes. The National Council rejected the initiative by 123 votes to 61, and the Council of States by 29 votes to 10.

Home purchase savings initiative

This popular initiative from the Swiss Society for the Promotion of Home Purchase Savings calls for the cantons to introduce tax incentives for the acquisition of property for owner occupation. Single persons should be allowed to deduct up to 15,000 Swiss francs a year from taxable income as a home purchase savings deposit for a maximum period of 10 years, while the limit for married couples would be twice as high. It also calls for deductions of up to 5,000 and 10,000 Swiss francs for structural energy-saving measures. Those behind the initiative want to allow more people than at present to achieve the dream of owning their own home. The Federal Council opposes the initiative because home ownership already enjoys tax benefits and because the initiative would primarily benefit people on higher incomes. As the National Council and Council of States were unable to agree on a position on the initiative or on an indirect counterproposal, the initiative will go to a referendum without a parliamentary recommendation.

"Six weeks holiday for everyone"

This popular initiative from the Christian-socialist federation of trade unions, *Travailsuisse*, calls for all employees to be given at least six weeks of paid holiday per year. The law currently provides for four weeks, and five weeks for the under-twenties. Those on the left and the trade unions hope to achieve a better balance between work and relaxation through this initiative. They claim that workloads have constantly increased with negative repercussions for the health of many employees. The Federal Council and the conservative parties argue that the current regulations have proven effective. These leave it to social partners to negotiate more generous holiday provisions or to pass on increases in productivity in the form of higher wages or shorter working hours. The National Council rejected the initiative by 122 votes to 61, and the Council of States by 32 votes to 10.

Gambling for the common good

With the "Gambling for the common good" popular initiative the cantons sought to secure their control over lotteries and to guarantee the use of gaming revenues for culture, social affairs and sport. The Federal Council and Parliament tackled the issue with a direct counterproposal, which led to the withdrawal of the initiative. The National Council recommended adoption of the counterproposal by 193 votes to 3, and the Council of States by 42 votes to 0.

Fixed prices of books

The fixing of prices of books, in other words the sale of books at set prices, is a constant political issue. In 1999, the Competition Commission declared a 100-year-old industry agreement in German-speaking Switzerland illegitimate. To save price fixing, advocates submitted proposals for it to be enshrined in law. These were approved by both chambers, against the will of the Federal Council, by 96 votes to 86 in the National Council and by 23 votes to 19 in the Council of States. Price fixing is to apply to online trading as well as bookshops. The Consumer Forum for German-speaking Switzerland and the Young Liberals have successfully called a referendum against the law. They want to allow competition in the book trade and to prevent excessive prices. Supporters of price fixing argue that it protects the book as a cultural asset. They claim that although bestsellers would be cheaper without price agreements, many books with small print runs would disappear from the shelves.