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Expatriate voters double down or deviate – but they never tip the scales

How have the Swiss Abroad voted in the last four years? We have analysed the results of the last 36 federal popular votes – and our findings are nuanced.

MARC LETTAU UND THEODORA PETER

The “Fifth Switzerland” confounded many with its distinctly green voting in the 2019 elections, which saw the Green Party make big gains among the domestic electorate but perform twice as well among expatriate voters. However, elections are a different proposition to the many popular votes that take place at federal level during a legislative period. Which begs the question: how have the Swiss Abroad voted during the last four years? How have they influenced the national result of each vote? And is it possible to identify definitive patterns in their voting behaviour? To get the big picture, “Swiss Review” took a closer look at the detailed results of the last 36 popular votes. In over a third of these votes – 14 out of 36 – the expatriate result was very similar to the domestic result, with just a few percentage points separating both. There was no significant difference. It is a simple and banal statement to make, but the “Fifth Switzerland” often thinks the same as Switzerland as a whole. We subsequently turned our attention to voting results showing a difference of five or more percentage points. This is what we found:

Doubling down

The “Fifth Switzerland” likes to double down. In 14 out of 36 proposals, it underscored the domestic vote by voting yes or no much more emphatically than the domestic electorate. This was particularly the case on social and ethical issues. For example, a much higher proportion of Swiss Abroad voted yes to paternity leave (+18.2 percentage points), the revised Transplantation Act (+16.2), an increase in the OASI pension age for women (+7.5), and “Marriage for all” (+7.1). The Swiss Abroad doubled down on the domestic no vote when they voted against the initiative to limit immigration: their rejection was a good 15 percentage points higher than the domestic result. They went with the tide – and then some – on all the above issues.

Deviating

A quarter of all votes – nine out of 36 – revealed a clear difference of opinion between domestic and expatriate voters, with a resounding yes in the “Fifth Switzerland” contradicting a no back at home – or vice versa. This is where we can make the link to the 2019 elections, in that the Swiss Abroad provided a “corrective” countervail mainly on green, environmental issues. Unlike Switzerland as a whole, they said yes to the Clean Drinking Water Initiative, yes to the CO2 Act and yes to the initiative to end factory farming. Their biggest deviation was on the CO2 Act, which failed at the ballot box in 2021. A whopping majority of the expatriate electorate, 72.2 per cent, approved the legislation – almost 23 percentage points more than the overall yes vote.

Conclusion no. 1: the Swiss Abroad vote in three different ways

After evaluating the 36 votes that took place during the most recent legislative period, we can safely say the following: the Swiss Abroad know what they want (and what they don’t want), but they are not an unpredictable, exotic or contrary electorate. They vote in three different ways: they confirm, they double down, or they deviate. They double down on social and ethical issues, and swim against the domestic tide of scepticism on environmental proposals.

Conclusion no. 2: the “Fifth Switzerland” never tips the scales

Expatriate voters never tip the scales either way. And none of the 36 votes of the last four years proved to be an exception to this rule. Their voice is simply too weak. The registered voters of the “Fifth Switzerland” account for only around four per cent of the entire electorate. If their yes or no vote is emphatic, they can have a marginal influence on the overall result – about 0.5 percentage points. But the expatriate vote usually has much less weight than that: only about 0.2 percentage points on average, based on all 36 votes.

Conclusion no. 3: Toeing the government line

Government-submitted voting proposals often meet with more approval in the “Fifth Switzerland” than in Switzerland itself, it has long been argued. The results of the last 36 votes show nothing to suggest otherwise. However, if we take voting recommendations by the Federal Council as our starting point, Swiss at home and abroad both toe the government line more or less to the same extent. The domestic electorate rejected Berne’s recommendation in 12 out of 36 votes. Voters abroad did so 13 times.

Conclusion no. 4: the Swiss Abroad are gaining political weight

Its influence may be relatively limited, but the “Fifth Switzerland” is gaining political weight. The number of Swiss Abroad on the electoral register is steadily increasing – and, in relative terms, increasing three times faster than the total number of Swiss Abroad. According to the Federal Statistical Office, 227,000 expatriates were eligible to vote on 31 December 2022. The “Fifth Switzerland” is, therefore, on the way to outstripping the canton of Ticino in political weight.

For background information on our analysis, visit revue.link/vote

