

Immigration control or bilateral agreements? The ultimate decision draws near

Blog | 7 October 2019

Prof Pascal Sciarini

Department of political science, University of Geneva

This autumn, the Swiss parliament is debating a new popular initiative launched by the euro-sceptic Swiss People's Party. The initiative demands the abrogation of the agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons, putting at risk important market access agreements. Next year, Swiss voters will have to weigh a tighter control of immigration against access to the EU market. In this blog post, Pascal Sciarini explains why voters are likely to support the government and thus give priority to market access over immigration control.

On February 9, 2014, a narrow majority of the Swiss people (50.3%), but a large majority of cantons (14.5 of 23 cantonal votes), backed the popular initiative "Stop mass immigration" sponsored by the Swiss People's Party. The initiative contradicted the bilateral agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons, since it aimed to reintroduce control over immigration through quotas on foreign workers and a preference for national workers in the labour market. It also demanded the renegotiation of international commitments within three years, to put them in line with the initiative's requirements.

The dilemma between immigration control and market access

The acceptance of the initiative "Stop mass immigration" came as a shock, as it endangered Switzerland's strategy of smooth, bilateral and sectoral integration into the EU. As a result of the so-called "guillotine clause" included in the first set of bilateral agreements concluded in 1999, the termination of the agreement on the free movement of persons would invalidate the other six treaties. After the EU Commission refused the Federal Council's repeated demand for a renegotiation of the freedom of movement agreement, the Swiss Parliament took the lead and opted for a (very) light implementation of the popular initiative. In December 2016, it passed a law that under certain conditions requires Swiss employers to inform Swiss job agencies about vacancies before hiring a non-resident of Switzerland, but does not limit the free movement of EU workers to Switzerland.

Deeply dissatisfied with this outcome, the Swiss People's Party responded with the launch of a new popular initiative called "For a moderate immigration (limitation initiative)". The title of the initiative is an understatement, since the initiative calls for the termination of the agreement on the free movement of persons. Swiss citizens will have to vote on that new initiative presumably in May next year (2020). By then, they will thus have to choose whether they want to terminate the free movement agreement in order to impose restrictions on immigration from the EU, or whether they want to continue the bilateral integration strategy – possibly extended to additional market access agreements (e.g. in the electricity sector, see also EFTA-Studies analysis Switzerland's Sectoral Access to the EU's Single Market).

How voters chose their priorities

Data from three opinion surveys conducted in December 2014, Spring 2015 and March 2016 help to shed light on how Swiss citizens regard the dilemma between immigration control and bilateral treaties (see references below). In those surveys, respondents were first reminded of the Federal Council's attempt to implement immigration control and, in parallel, to maintain the bilateral agreements with the EU. Then respondents were asked which goal was most important to them, in case it was impossible to reach both – the continuation of the bilateral strategy or the control over immigration? The answers to this question show a clear preference for the bilateral treaties: as an average of the three surveys, 57% of respondents favor continuing the bilateral strategy, 34% favor limiting immigration, and 9% are undecided.

In addition to this prospective question, the three surveys also included a retrospective question asking respondents whether they voted Yes or No to the "Stop mass immigration" initiative in February 2014. Unsurprisingly, preferences regarding the bilateral treaties versus immigration control vary heavily depending on respondents' vote on the initiative against mass immigration. On the one hand, voters who rejected the initiative almost unanimously favor the continuation of the bilateral treaties (87%). On the other hand, about 60% of voters who accepted the initiative also give priority to limiting immigration. These are the two hardliner groups of ardent supporters of bilateral agreements and ardent supporters of immigration control, respectively.

Yet the group of respondents who said Yes to the initiative against mass immigration is not completely homogeneous. A sizeable share (about a third) of voters who supported the initiative nevertheless say they would give priority to the continuation of the bilateral agreements, should they choose between those agreements and immigration control. This group accounts for the overall preference for continuing the bilateral strategy over limiting immigration mentioned above and will obviously be decisive for the outcome of the forthcoming vote on the popular initiative "For a moderate immigration".

The role of trust in the government

A closer look at the socio-demographic and political characteristics of those decisive voters leads to three main findings. First, among voters who said Yes to the initiative against mass immigration, age is a first critical factor for identifying those who, in the forthcoming vote, are likely to make up their mind and favor the continuation of the bilateral integration strategy. As it turns out, old supporters of the Stop Mass Immigration initiative are much more likely than young respondents to favor the bilateral treaties, possibly because the former are more experienced and, therefore, more aware of the economic importance of the bilateral treaties. This, together with the fact that turnout is far higher among old voters than among young voters, may work to the advantage of the pro-integration camp in the forthcoming vote.

Second, voters who supported the initiative against mass immigration are far more likely to nevertheless favor bilateral agreements over immigration control if they trust the Federal Council. A similar effect of government trust also holds for voters who did not or could not vote in February 2014. These results underline the important role of the Federal Council, whose unity, credibility and leadership may play a central role in the forthcoming vote.

Third, left-right ideology has a different effect than age and trust in government, meaning that this effect does not differ between voters who said Yes and voters who said No to the initiative against mass immigration: Among both groups of voters the probability to continue supporting immigration control in a forthcoming vote increases substantially when one moves from voters who self-locate at the extreme right to voters who self-locate at the extreme left of the left-right scale. This result suggests that an erosion of the left camp's support for European integration (e.g. as a result of the weakening of the flanking measures against wage dumping) would threaten the continuation of the bilateral strategy.

Conclusions

Taken together, these results show that Swiss voters are predisposed to support the Federal Council's bilateral strategy. Given their prospective character these results must, however, be taken with a grain of salt. While the choice offered to survey respondents is very similar to the one Swiss citizens will face next year when voting on the initiative "For a moderate immigration", public debate has not begun yet. Moreover, opinion formation and the outcome of the referendum will also depend on whether and how the other sensitive issue of the framework agreement will be solved by then.

References

Sciarini, Pascal, Alessandro Naï and Anke Tresch. 2014. *Analyse de la votation fédérale du 9 février 2014*. Genève/Berne: Université de Genève/gfs.bern.

Sciarini, Pascal, Simon Lanz and Alessandro Nai. 2015. "Till immigration do us part? Public opinion and the dilemma between immigration control and bilateral agreements." *Swiss Political Science Review* 21 (2): 271-286.

Sciarini, Pascal, Alexandra Feddersen and Simon Lanz. 2016. *Analyse de la votation fédérale du 28 février 2016*. Genève/Berne: Université de Genève/gfs.bern.

Author

Prof. Pascal Sciarini, Department of political science, University of Geneva

Citation

Sciarini, Pascal (2019): Immigration control or bilateral agreements? The ultimate decision draws near. Blog. efta-studies.org.



EFTA-Studies.org provides in-depth analyses of the institutions and processes that link the EFTA states to the EU. An independent academic blog addresses developments in the EFTA states from a political and legal perspective, thus providing up to date information on the EFTA states' relations with the EU.

Liechtenstein-Institut | info@liechtenstein-institut.li | www.liechtenstein-institut.li