

The drivers of Swiss voters' decisions in direct democratic votes on European integration

Blog | 21 October 2019

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In the shadow of the Brexit saga, there is another bilateral deal negotiated by the EU that is also waiting for ratification: the so-called “framework” or “institutional” agreement with Switzerland. The Swiss government is hesitating to sign it because it is uncertain whether parliament, and ultimately the voters, would approve the agreement. While in the case of Brexit another popular vote is one option among several, in the Swiss case the next popular vote on a European issue will come for sure – the only question is when. In this blog post, Pascal Sciarini explains how voters' social characteristics and their political conviction influence their votes in referendums on Europe, and how this pattern has remained stable over recent decades.

The framework agreement is meant to facilitate the adaptation of Swiss law to future changes in EU rules. Switzerland would adapt “dynamically” and “autonomously” to EU law in the areas covered by five existing bilateral agreements on market access. While from a systemic perspective the framework agreement is admittedly of far lower importance than the Brexit deal, it is nevertheless meaningful from the perspective of Swiss-EU relationships, also because it is a precondition for the conclusion of new bilateral agreements in other policy fields (e.g. in the electricity market).

The increasing role of referendums in foreign policy

The ratification of the framework agreement is facing fierce resistance in Switzerland. Opposed to any kind of a closer relationship with the EU, the Swiss People's Party vehemently rejects the agreement, which in its view would lead to the surrender of Swiss sovereignty and would also sentence direct democracy to death. Yet even political forces that usually support Switzerland's European integration are not willing to endorse the framework agreement. In particular, parties of the left and trade unions are concerned about the weakening of the flanking measures against wage dumping.

Fully aware that the unholy alliance between the conservative right and the left would kill the agreement in the ratification phase, the Federal Council has asked the EU for some “clarification”.

In the – for the time being unlikely – scenario that the framework agreement will eventually be accepted by the Swiss parliament, it will for sure be attacked by a referendum. The Swiss people will thus once again have the last word. In most countries, foreign policy is the exclusive domain of government – and secondarily of parliament. Switzerland is a unique case in that respect, since direct democracy grants citizens strong co-decision rights on the definition of foreign policy. To be sure, for a long time foreign policy has been largely immune from direct democracy. However, two constitutional changes (in 1977 and 2003) have substantially extended the scope and number of international treaties submitted to the optional referendum.

Moreover, in the era of globalization, an increasing number of issues that used to be domestic in nature now have a strong international character. This also contributes to the influence of the Swiss people on the making of foreign policy broadly defined. These institutional and structural changes have had far-reaching consequences on the characteristics of issues submitted to direct democratic votes: whereas in the 1960s-1970s less than one vote out of ten related to an internationalized issue, that share has increased to three out of ten in the 2000s and 2010s.

Swiss voters' stance on European policy

Switzerland's European policy is a case in hand in that respect. Ironically, while Switzerland is not a member of the EU, there have been more direct democratic votes on European integration than in any EU member-state (nine since the rejection of the agreement on the European Economic Area in 1992). From a researcher's perspective, the high number of popular initiatives and referendums is an asset, as it offers a rich empirical basis for studying the individual determinants of support (or opposition) to European integration among the Swiss public. I carried out such a study based on data from opinion surveys conducted after each of the nine direct democratic votes relating – directly or indirectly – to Switzerland's European policy since 1992.

The take-home message is fourfold. First, the determinants of citizens' voting behaviour in European policy are fairly stable from one direct democratic vote to the next. In European policy, as in foreign policy more generally, the voters' decision is heavily influenced by the social groups they belong to and by their political values, and this much more so than in domestic policy. This means that the factors that have influenced the vote choice in the past are also likely to matter in the – prospective – vote on the framework agreement.

Second, among social characteristics the level of education appears as a major driver: citizens with a low educational level oppose European integration, whereas highly educated citizens support it; this is arguably so because the former feel threatened by international openness, whereas the latter see it as an opportunity. German-speaking and French-speaking citizens, who cast contrary votes

in the 1992 EEA vote (the former rather against, the latter strongly in favour of the EEA), have become more alike in their voting since then. In the meantime, Italian-speaking citizens have become the main opponents of Switzerland's European policy in general, and of the free movement of persons in particular. Another divide is between people living in urban and rural areas, with the latter being far more reluctant to accept European integration than the former.

New political conflict lines

Third, ideology, party identification and political values play an even greater role. Support for Europe increases dramatically as one moves from citizens who self-locate on the far right to those who self-locate on the left of the political spectrum. While in domestic politics the main conflict line is between the left (Socialists and Greens) and the – moderate and conservative – right (Radical Liberals, Christian Democrats), in European policy followers of left parties and followers of moderate right parties are jointly pitted against followers of the conservative right (Swiss People's Party). The ideological and partisan divide further overlaps with citizens' political values regarding the desired level of international openness of the country: voters who favour Switzerland's openness towards the outside world consistently back European integration, whereas those who prefer greater closedness consistently oppose European integration.

Fourth, the conclusion that one can draw from these results is clear. Beyond economic and utilitarian considerations, voters' decisions on European integration are markedly influenced by ideological, cultural and identity-related considerations. Direct democratic votes on European policy provide fertile ground for the activation of the new cultural-normative conflict on the "integration-demarkation" or "closedness-openness" dimension, which sees Europeanization/globalization in terms of "winners" and "losers". While highly educated citizens see international openness as an opportunity, citizens with a lower educational level see it as a threat, not only for their job or welfare, but also for their way of life, their culture – and for national identity more generally.

Such a conflict is likely to feature prominently in any new direct democratic vote on European integration in Switzerland, as it did in the past, and as it also did in the Brexit referendum. According to Swiss experience, in direct democratic votes on European integration general attitudes regarding international openness add to the expectations about the concrete consequences of further integration steps, and tend to enhance the skepticism of the public.

List of direct democratic votes on Switzerland's European policy

Ballot measure and institutional type	Year	Outcome	Turnout rate
Treaty on the European Economic Area (compulsory referendum)	1992	Rejected (49.7% Yes)	78.7%
"EU membership application: let the people decide" (popular initiative)	1997	Rejected (25.9% Yes)	35.3%
Bilateral agreements (optional referendum)	2000	Accepted (67.2% Yes)	48.3%
"Yes to Europa" (popular initiative)	2001	Rejected (23.2% Yes)	55.8%
Association to the Schengen and Dublin agreements (optional referendum)	2005	Accepted (54.6% Yes)	56.6%
Extension of the agreement on the free movement of persons to new EU member states (optional referendum)	2005	Accepted (56.0% Yes)	54.5%
Federal Law on the cooperation with Eastern European countries (optional referendum)	2006	Accepted (53.4% Yes)	45.0%
Renewal of the agreement on the free movement of persons and its extension to Romania and Bulgaria (optional referendum)	2009	Accepted (59.6% Yes)	51.4%
"Stop Mass Immigration" (popular initiative)	2014	Accepted (50.3% Yes)	56.4%

Black = vote in line with the voting recommendation of the Federal Council and Parliament

Red = vote against the voting recommendation of the Federal Council and Parliament

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Citation

Sciarini, Pascal (2019): The drivers of Swiss voters' decisions in direct democratic votes on European integration. Blog. efta-studies.org.



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