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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **40 (2013)**

Heft 6

PDF erstellt am: **12.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906675>

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The people reject proposals from the left and right

On 24 November the "1:12 – For fair pay" popular initiative suffered an emphatic defeat. Rejected were also the Swiss People's Party (SVP) family initiative and the proposed price increase for the motorway tax disc.

By Jürg Müller

The fierce referendum campaign and the high turnout of over 53 percent were clear indications that Swiss people took a strong interest in the issues put to the vote on 24 November. Few people are apathetic about salary and wealth-distribution issues, family and tax matters and a more expensive motorway tax disc. However, not one of the three proposals was successful.

The Young Socialists' 1:12 initiative sought to enshrine in the constitution the principle that the highest salary should not exceed the lowest at the same company by more than a factor of twelve. The proposal addressed a major issue of the times – the disapproval of the million-franc salaries received by top management. However, the frontal attack on the wage packets of bosses failed in contrast to the fat-cat initiative in March. The initiative was resoundingly defeated, with over 65

percent of the electorate voting against it. The initiative's opponents had conceded during the referendum campaign that million-franc salaries were unjustified, but had argued that the initiative represented an excessive infringement of economic freedom. The proposal had triggered widespread debate about fair salaries, but the group behind it shot itself in the foot with its radicalism. Fears over negative repercussions for the economy saw it defeated. The debate will nevertheless continue. Those on the left have two further initiatives in the pipeline concerning wealth-distribution issues – the minimum wage initiative and the inheritance tax initiative.

No tax allowances for looking after your own children

The SVP family initiative sparked a fierce row over family models during the refer-

endum campaign. The SVP was seeking tax breaks for families who look after their children themselves. It argued that this was only fair as parents who send their children to crèches can claim tax allowances. Opponents of the proposal criticised tax breaks for "traditional" families with a stay-at-home mum looking after the children because no costs are incurred. There were also warnings of huge tax deficits from various quarters. 58.5 percent of the electorate rejected the conservative popular initiative.

Rather surprisingly, the price increase for the motorway tax disc from 40 to 100 Swiss francs a year also failed to gain acceptance and was rejected by 60.5 percent of voters. This is presumably primarily because the proposal put forward by the Federal Council and Parliament was opposed by two camps with different motives. Automobile associations and the SVP argued that the fiscal authorities already charge motorists enough. The Greens, Green Liberals and some members of the Social Democratic Party (SP) opposed the initiative to prevent further expansion of the road network.

FURTHER PROPOSALS GOING TO REFERENDUM ON 9 FEBRUARY 2014

FABI will regulate railway financing

The Swiss love their railways – in 2012 they travelled 2,274 kilometres by train on average, more than anyone else in the world. The public transport system is constantly being expanded. The Gotthard Base Tunnel, the longest railway tunnel in the world, is set to be connected to the network by the end of 2016. The cost of maintaining the growing infrastructure and the additional expansion nevertheless has to be met. A further milestone in Swiss railway history is about to be set: the Swiss people will vote on the proposal for the financing and expansion of rail infrastructure (FABI).

The operation, maintenance and expansion of the railways are to be financed by a single new railway infrastructure fund (BIF). The existing resources from the fixed-term Finöv fund (kilometre-based heavy goods vehicle duty, fuel duty and VAT) are to be transferred to the permanent BIF. There will also be other sources of financing: the railway companies will pay higher charges for using the network, ticket and rail card prices will rise, the travel cost allowance for direct federal taxation will be limited to 3,000 Swiss francs, the cantons will make a capital contribution of 500 million Swiss francs and federal government will also increase its contribution. A VAT per mille will additionally be levied for a limited period. FABI will at the same time ensure the expansion of the railway network by 2025 at a cost of 6.4 billion Swiss francs.

However, the financial impact on roads will not be greater than at present – on the contrary, some of the fuel duties will be returned to the roads.

In a rare show of unanimity, the proposal is supported by virtually all parties and associations, even the Touring Club (TCS). However, this organisation is calling for a similar financing solution for the road infrastructure. The public transport-oriented Swiss Transport Club (VCS) had exerted pressure with an initiative along the lines of the FABI proposal and has now withdrawn its popular initiative.

Meeting abortion costs independently

The "funding of abortion is a private matter" popular initiative launched by religious and political groups on the right will also be decided at referendum. This aims to stop mandatory health insurance having to cover abortion costs. However, it is precisely this issue that was expressly decided upon in 2002 with the acceptance of the "first-trimester rule". The initiative's opponents are calling this a direct attack on the achievements of the "first-trimester rule". Adoption of the initiative would jeopardise access to abortion for socially disadvantaged women, in turn resulting in more unsafe abortions. Supporters contend that pregnancy is not an illness and that abortion costs should not therefore be met by health insurance. (JM)