

Press Release

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Voters send a clear political signal

By backing the popular initiative to ban the construction of minarets, Swiss voters sent a clear signal of dissatisfaction with the spread of Islam in Switzerland. However, the post-vote VOX-Analysis also shows that support for the minaret ban does not mean that Muslims in general are being rejected in Switzerland. The decisive factors influencing voting behaviour were the voters' ideological placement on the left-right scale, as well as their fundamental values.

The Vox-Analyses of national referendums and initiatives have been carried out since 1977. Based on post-vote opinion polls, these analyses provide information on who voted how, and which motives and arguments were decisive for the outcome. The Vox-Analysis of the three national votes of November 29, 2009 is special for two reasons: It is the 100th Vox-Analysis, and at its centre is the analysis of the vote on the popular initiative to ban the construction of minarets, which was accepted by 57.7 percent of Swiss voters.

Right in favour, left against

Voting behaviour on the minaret ban was strongly influenced by the voters' ideological left-right self-placement: More than 80 percent of voters on the left rejected the initiative, while a similarly vast majority of voters on the right backed the ban. Hence, the behaviour of those in the middle of the political spectrum was decisive for the outcome of the vote. The overwhelming majority of Swiss People's Party (SVP) supporters backed the initiative, while Social Democrats and Green Party supporters clearly rejected it. Against the recommendations of their party leaders a majority of supporters of the centre parties CVP (Christian People's Party) and FDP (Liberal Democrats) voted in favour of the ban (CVP: 54 percent yes, FDP: 60 percent yes).

The outcome of this vote cannot be explained by xenophobia, resistance to globalisation and a resulting loss of Swiss identity alone. Also a substantial minority of voters expressing their support for equal opportunities for foreigners and for an open, modern Switzerland voted in favour of the initiative (40 percent yes).

No gender gap, but strong rejection of ban by women on the left

Of all socio-demographic factors, education influenced voting behaviour the most. While 76 percent of those voters whose highest education is an apprenticeship voted in favour of the initiative, it was only supported by 48 percent of those with a higher education and 34 percent of those with a university degree. Both Protestant and Catholic Christians supported the ban (60 percent yes), whereas non-religious voters rejected it.

There are no significant differences in voting behaviour regarding gender and age. However, while it was speculated after the vote that women on the left supported the initiative for feminist reasons, the Vox-Analysis shows left-leaning women clearly rejected the ban. Only 16 percent of them voted in favour, while 21 percent of men on the left supported the ban. On the right hand side of the political spectrum, however, women backed the initiative more than men (women: 87 percent yes, men: 71 percent yes).

No general rejection of Muslims

Supporters of the ban mostly named the idea of making a symbolic stand against the spread of Islam in Switzerland as the main motive behind their decision. Roughly every 6th voter in favour of the initiative justified his decision with reference to the discrimination of Christian churches in Muslim countries. Only 15 percent of the supporters of the initiative justified their decision by criticizing Muslims living in Switzerland. The acceptance of the minaret ban can therefore not be interpreted as a general rejection of Muslims in Switzerland. Furthermore, 65 percent of voters expressed their belief that the Swiss and Muslim ways of life are compatible. However, this positive evaluation had no impact on voting behaviour: also those who generally believe in the compatibility of the two cultures voted in favour of the ban (56 percent).

Voting behaviour and minorities in recent years

An additional analysis of almost 300 national and cantonal votes affecting minorities from 1960 until 2009 shows that voting behaviour differs strongly depending on the minority concerned. Voters tend to vote against minority interests if the minority in question is perceived as not being well integrated and as having alien values. This affects mainly foreigners: almost half (45 percent) of the 70 referendums and initiatives concerning this minority that took place since 1960 had a negative outcome for foreigners. Muslims are affected doubly in this regard: as a religious minority and as foreigners (around 90 percent of Muslims in Switzerland are foreigners). The rights of other minorities have not been this negatively affected by direct democratic votes, on the contrary. The legal and financial situation of the handicapped, for instance, has mostly been improved through the 25 votes that concerned them. On the federal level, voters on the left who are in favour of an open, modern Switzerland are generally supportive of minorities, while voters on the right with more conservative attitudes are more critical.

Arguments more important than party recommendations

In the course of the last 15 years, supporters of Swiss parties generally followed the party line with regards to federal votes. However, the analysis of motives and arguments shows that voters seldom translate the party recommendation directly into a yes or no vote. Instead, the arguments that the favoured party puts forth in a campaign are focused on, and often their line of argumentation is followed. The recommendations of the Federal Council, the Swiss government, however, are a stronger influence, in particular if proposals are complex and the general public is not familiar with the issues at hand. Here, trust in government is an important intervening factor: voters who generally trust the Federal Council are also more likely to follow its recommendations.

Further Information:

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