

# A Great Test of Swiss-EU Relations in Referendum Form

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As it struggles in trying to keep its position of true neutrality, Switzerland's international relations always become very intriguing to analyze as time passes. The country's stance of true neutrality along with its unique application of direct democracy provides an ample amount of exciting circumstances for any international politics enthusiasts and experts looking for a new topic to dissect. One such event occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September this year, as Switzerland held a landmark referendum on the controversial topics of free movement and immigration.

The referendum proposed and backed mainly by the Swiss People's Party, an anti-Islam, anti-immigration, Euroscepticism party with a respectable amount of popularity,<sup>1</sup> was extremely critical for the future of Switzerland-European Union relations because if it were to pass it would violate many treaties between the two sides. The proposal was aimed to rein in immigration, intending to cancel several Swiss-EU agreements that allow free movement between the European Union and Switzerland. In short, the Swiss People's Party introduced a proposal that would limit immigration at the cost of trampling on several Swiss-European agreements.

However, the matter is not as simple as that. The freedom of movement is largely regarded as a "guillotine clause" of the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the EU, meaning that if it were scrapped, it would take the rest of any agreement including freedom of movement with it. University of Geneva professor Pascal Sciarini noted that if Switzerland tried to abolish freedom of movement, many deals regarding trade, agriculture, and air traffic would also be voided.<sup>2</sup> The loss of these accompanying benefits was one part of the low popularity of the proposal, in addition to the Swiss voters who directly supported immigration and free movement within the EU.

And in the end, because of the aforementioned low popularity, the proposal could not make it through the referendum. It lost by a sizable margin, with all votes counted, nearly 62% voted against, while 38% were in favor of the proposal.<sup>3</sup> In the end, the Swiss people chose not to limit freedom of movement between their country and the European Union. Obviously, this was generally seen as a boon to Swiss-EU relations by people on both sides. EU economy commissioner Paulo Gentiloni spoke of the result positively, saying that it was "a beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss\\_People%27s\\_Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swiss_People%27s_Party)

<sup>2</sup>

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/09/25/switzerland-immigration-referendum-will-the-swiss-vote-to-end-eu-freedom-of-movement>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54316316>

day for democracy and Europe"<sup>4</sup> Both parties were also saved from the burden of potentially long and costly negotiations.

The result of the referendum is possibly even more beneficial for Swiss internal affairs, however, since Switzerland's economy is heavily reliant on immigrants and external and internal trade deals with the EU. For example, 27% of the working-age population is foreign-born,<sup>5</sup> and more than half of all Swiss exports are to other European countries.<sup>6</sup> Had the proposal passed, it would have brought Switzerland into a very tough spot economically, not to mention this all would be happening in the middle of a pandemic.

In conclusion, this referendum seems to have concluded with a positive result for Switzerland according to our analysis. The Swiss people seem to have chosen the right move, but of course, only time will tell what the actual right choice was. Still, even if it becomes apparent that this was the sub-optimal choice, nothing is stopping the Swiss people from having another referendum on the matter.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/swiss-voters-reject-curbs-on-eu-immigration-switzerland-referendum>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/switzerland/49654710.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.worldstopexports.com/switzerlands-top-import-partners/>