[CH] Close referendum result on universal broadcasting charge

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The Swiss people adopted an amendment of the Radio- und Fernsehgesetz (Radio and Television Act - RTVG) with a wafer-thin majority in a referendum held on 14 June 2015. Changes to the financing of public service broadcasting, which the Swiss Parliament had approved in September 2014 (see IRIS 2014-10/6) were supported by 50.08% of the voters. The referendum was preceded by intensive political campaigning that attracted a high level of media coverage.

Voter turnout for the referendum was a mediocre 42.8%. According to the provisional official result announced on polling day, supporters of the proposed amendment outnumbered their opponents by an extraordinarily narrow margin of 3,696 votes (1,128,369 for, 1,124,673 against). In view of the close outcome, a recount may be demanded and ordered.

The referendum was held because the Schweizerische Gewerbeverband (Swiss Trades Association) had collected the 50,000 signatures required. The main theme of the RTVG amendment is the replacement of the current device-based charge with a universal broadcasting charge which households and businesses will, in future, have to pay even if they do not own a reception device. The Federal Council (Bundesrat) had proposed the change in response to technological advances, since radio and television programmes were increasingly being watched on mobile phones, tablets and computers: 92% of Swiss households and practically all businesses have Internet access.

The Swiss Trades Association particularly opposed the idea that households without reception devices and all companies with an annual turnover of at least CHF 500,000 would have to pay the charge. It criticised the universal charge as a new tax, for which there was no constitutional justification.

The purpose of the charge is unchanged, i.e. to finance the Swiss broadcasting corporation SRG (which receives the largest share of the CHF 1.3 billion generated by the charge each year), as well as the 21 local radio and 13 local television stations with a public service remit. Their annual share would increase from around CHF 54 million to around CHF 80 million. The proposal’s opponents argued that the new payment system was being voted on before a fundamental debate on the future of public service broadcasting and of SRG’s remit had been held.

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SRG therefore found itself at the centre of a heated political campaign.

The referendum result showed significant differences between the various parts of Switzerland. Most of German-speaking Switzerland opposed the proposal (except for Basel City and the trilingual canton of Grisons), whereas the French-speaking cantons (Vaud, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Jura and the bilingual Fribourg canton) were generally in favour, as were Swiss expatriates.

However, the rejection of the universal charge in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino (52% opposed) was a surprise, since the canton will benefit hugely from the redistribution of the funds generated, contributing less than 5% of the total revenue, but receiving around 20% of the money collected. The SRG-owned Radiotelevisione Svizzera di Lingua Italiana (RSI) operates two television and three radio stations, which many opponents of the RTVG amendment consider excessive.

This was the first Swiss referendum concerning broadcasting legislation. Although referendums on new legislative provisions are common in Switzerland, they have never previously had anything to do with audiovisual media. However, a referendum was held concerning a broadcasting-related provision of the Constitution, which was adopted at the third attempt in 1984.

Vorläufiges amtliches Abstimmungsergebnis und Erläuterungen des Bundesrates zur Abstimmungsvorlage

https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/abstimmungen/20150614/rtvg.html#resultate

Provisional official referendum result and Bundesrat's explanation of the referendum proposal

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