[CH] Majority want a strong public radio and television service

IRIS 2018-6:1/11

Franz Zeller
Federal Office of Justice, FOJ

The desire to safeguard a strong public audiovisual service throughout Switzerland and the overwhelmingly positive assessment of the service provided by the Schweizerische Radio- und Fernsehgesellschaft (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation - SRG) were, according to a representative survey, the main reasons for the recent rejection of a popular initiative entitled “Yes to the abolition of radio and television licence fees (abolition of Billag fees)”. In the referendum on 4 March 2018, only 28.4% (833,630 people) voted to amend Article 93 of the Bundesverfassung (Federal Constitution), while 71.6% (2,098,139 people) rejected the proposal. Under the failed initiative, all Swiss radio and television services would have become commercially funded. The 54.4% turnout of eligible voters was higher than the Swiss average.

A survey of selected voters is conducted after every Swiss referendum. These VOTO surveys are funded by the Federal Chancellery and are designed to provide the authorities and the general public with useful information about the reasons behind the referendum result.

According to the VOTO survey, the majority of voters (60%) feared that the SRG would not survive if the licence fee were abolished; 73% of those questioned said they had a high or very high level of confidence in the SRG; 70% use the SRG’s TV or radio service on a daily basis; and 69% describe its quality as good or very good.

However, the clear rejection of the initiative does not mean that the Swiss people do not want any kind of change: 58% of the survey participants said that the SRG should now be reformed and downsized. The most common reason given by those who voted in favour of the proposal was the amount of the current licence fee, which was the deciding factor for 36% of the initiative’s supporters.

The age category with the highest proportion of yes votes was 40-49 (40%). However, contrary to original expectations, the rejection rate was greatest among the youngest group of voters (the ‘Netflix’ generation): only 20% of 18- to 29-year olds voted in favour of the proposed constitutional amendment.

As well as calling for the abolition of the licence fee, the popular initiative demanded that the Confederation not subsidise radio and television stations or

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

run its own channels in peace time, and that broadcaster licences be regularly auctioned. It also wanted the current public service remit to be removed from the Federal Constitution, which states that radio and television should contribute to education and cultural development, to the free shaping of opinion and to entertainment; take account of the particularities of Switzerland and the needs of the cantons; present events accurately; and allow a diversity of opinions to be expressed appropriately.

Article 93 of the Federal Constitution remains unaltered following the referendum of 4 March 2018. However, fundamental changes to the law are in the pipeline, with a new Gesetz über elektronische Medien (Electronic Media Act) set to replace the Radio- und Fernsehgesetz (Radio and Television Act - RTVG) in a few years' time. The authorities hope to table a preliminary draft for public consultation in the summer.

Results of the VOTO survey on the Swiss referendum of 4 March 2018, 19 April 2018

Provisional official referendum result and comments by the Federal Council, 4 March 2018

Media release on preparations for a future Electronic Media Act, 12 March 2018

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026

© European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe) 2026