Defining victory in a direct democracy

By Celia Luterbacher

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Is Swiss politics just a numbers game?

(Keystone)

Winners versus losers, leftwing versus rightwing – the political process is full of rhetoric that separates people and issues into categories. But the

reality is rarely so black-and-white, particularly in a direct democracy like Switzerland.

On February 28, 2016, Swiss citizens went to the polls to vote on four separate issues – among them, an initiative to enforce deportation of criminal foreigners, and an initiative to ban speculation on food commodities.

In the end, 41.1% of voters said 'yes' to the Swiss People's Party's so-called enforcement initiative, while 40.1% said 'yes' to the Young Socialists' food speculation initiative. In other words, both lost.

Vote results: February 28, 2016

Numbers-wise, it was a nearly identical outcome for the parties that had championed the two initiatives. But in practice, the outcomes were very different.

As Switzerland's largest political party, the People's Party considered receiving 41.1% of the vote for their enforcement initiative to be a loss. On the other hand, the Young Socialists, who represent just 1% of the Swiss population, celebrated the support they received for their proposed ban on food commodity speculation.

“Of course, we prefer to win, but we are happy we got more than 40% of the vote,” Young Socialists president Fabian Molina told swissinfo.ch.

Food speculation initiative

The Young Socialists, the youth section of the leftwing Social Democratic Party, originally launched their food speculation initiative in 2012. They argued that when companies speculate – i.e., make investments based on calculated financial risks – on food commodities, spikes in food prices can result, with especially harmful consequences for poor people. The Young Socialists called for a ban that would prevent banks, insurers, and investment funds based in Switzerland from speculating on food-related commodities to prevent this kind of price fluctuation. But others argued that the move could mean economic disaster for Switzerland by discouraging investments of global companies.

Enforcement of deportation initiative

Switzerland’s conservative right wanted a rule that said that if a foreigner residing in Switzerland commits a crime, he or she would automatically be deported to their country of origin. This would apply across the board in all crime cases, even those concerning so-called “Secondos”, second generation immigrants who had spent their entire lives in Switzerland and had no close ties to their native countries. Opponents felt that in addition to denying people their basic human rights, the rule would not allow for special circumstances in which deportation would result in severe hardship, for example by sending a person to a country where they had no family or language skills.

“A slap in the face”

The Young Socialists had gone out on a limb with their extremely leftwing initiative, and at a particularly risky time, with the Swiss economy still reeling from the impact of the strong franc.

“The Young Socialists brought the food speculation ban initiative as the underdogs, with idealistic concerns that were dismissed by large organisations as being unnecessary and anti-business,” says Niklaus Bieri, a researcher at the University of Bern Institute for Political Science.

“For me, the fact that the Young Socialists did not win this vote was not a surprise. But despite electoral defeat, the Young Socialists were nevertheless able to maintain their reputation.”

Meanwhile, the People's Party had been struggling to get their deportation initiative implemented since 2010: after their original initiative was accepted, parliament modified it to address challenges to implementing it in practice. The February 28 vote thus focused on the "enforcement" of the original strategy.

Bieri called the vote result "a slap in the face, given the claim of the People's Party that they would be enforcing the will of the people with this initiative".

Adrian Amstutz, a senior member of the House of Representatives for the People's Party, says his party accepts the loss as the decision of the Swiss people, but expresses confidence in future success. He also points out the distinction between victory on the scale of an initiative, and on the scale of a nation.

"Direct democracy is one of the greatest achievements of modern-day Switzerland. Here the people govern, and this should remain so," Amstutz told swissinfo.ch.

"The voices of the voters are, from a political party point of view, a good indicator of success. From a national perspective, it is the preservation and development of security, independence, freedom and prosperity that show how successful a political system is."

DIRECT DEMOCRACY

What's a people's or citizens' initiative?

By Michele Andina

Switzerland gives its citizens the chance to play a direct part in political decision-making. Although direct democracy is not unique to ...

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"It would not surprise me if the People's Party is shown to be right about the enforcement initiative in the end... if the first foreign murderers and rapists are not deported, there will be a rude awakening for many voters."

Silver linings

According to Bieri, while there are very few – if any – situations where losing a people's initiative can actually be preferable to winning, there can still be important silver linings to a minority vote in a direct democracy like Switzerland.

“If a vote fails, the losing players can often still rely on having a large part of the population on their side. In rare cases, a vote that is lost by a large majority can still be deemed a notable success, with a significant influence on politics,” Bieri says.

Case-in-point

In 1989, anti-army initiative from the pacifist group Switzerland without an Army, received more than one-third of the vote. Although the initiative itself failed, the fact that a third of the voters supported the abolition of the Swiss army was highly unexpected. This result damaged the army’s standing and significance in Swiss society – something that was interpreted as a success by the vote’s initiators.

“When you start an initiative, you want to win it. But in the meantime, you have other goals like winning new party members, and being in the centre of the media interest. Your goal is to present your movement as a strong, serious movement in the political discussion, and I think we achieved that,” says Molina.

“With this vote, we re-politicised issues of hunger and starvation, which were for a long time just a matter of fact - there was no discussion about the fact that the hunger of the poor has something to do with the rich and how we live in the west.”

Who’s keeping score?

While bringing issues to the public’s attention may already count as a victory for smaller political parties, there are other ways to define political success apart from the results of popular initiatives. For example in his own research, Bieri measures the impact of political actors based on the incorporation of their ideas into Swiss law or the constitution.

He also points out that focusing on winning and losing votes is not the be-all, end-all of politics in Switzerland anyway.

“In a system in which two major parties compete with each other, the defeat of one

party to the other is mercilessly exploited," Bieri explains.

"Switzerland has a multi-party system – smaller parties are represented in parliament, and cantonal governments are also composed of representatives of several parties. So the question of winning or losing in Switzerland is therefore probably less significant than it is countries with a more polarised political system."

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