

Switzerland wanted more immigration controls, but economic self-interest will probably prevail



Four years ago the Swiss voted to curb the freedom of movement of people between their country and the EU. Faced with the threat of a breakdown in its bilateral agreements with the EU, the government implemented only minor changes. With a further vote in prospect, **Pascal Sciarini (University of Geneva)** argues that economic realism is likely to win out over the desire to control immigration.

Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, but there have been more direct democratic votes on European integration in Switzerland than in any EU member state. After the rejection of the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992, the Federal Council (the Swiss government) enjoyed consistent support for its strategy of bilateral agreements with the EU, winning eight direct democratic votes in a row between 1997 and 2009. However, it suffered a major defeat on February 9, 2014. On that day Swiss citizens backed the popular initiative “Stop mass immigration”, which was sponsored by the Swiss People’s Party – a national-conservative and populist, but governing party.



A defaced Swiss People’s Party poster , 2007. Photo: [oledoe](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

“Stop mass immigration” contradicted the bilateral agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons, since it aimed to reintroduce control over immigration through quotas on foreign workers and a preference for national workers in the labour market. It also demanded the Swiss government renegotiate international commitments within three years, to put them in line with the initiative’s requirements.

As a result of the so-called “guillotine clause” included in the first set of Switzerland-EU bilateral agreements concluded in 1998, the termination of the agreement on the free movement of persons would have invalidated the other six agreements. When the EU Commission refused Switzerland’s demand to renegotiate freedom of movement, the Swiss Parliament took the lead and opted for a (very) light implementation of the popular initiative. In autumn 2016, it adopted a law that under certain conditions requires Swiss employers to inform Swiss job agencies about vacancies before hiring a non-Swiss, but does not limit the free movement of EU workers to Switzerland.

Deeply dissatisfied with this outcome, the Swiss People’s Party responded early this year with the launch of a new popular initiative, this time explicitly targeting the agreement on the free movement of persons. In two years or so Swiss citizens will again have to vote, and to choose between more control over immigration or the continuation of the strategy of smooth, bilateral integration in the EU.

According to a poll carried out in the aftermath of the 2014 popular vote, the vast majority of voters who supported the “Stop mass immigration” initiative were ready to risk the termination of the bilateral agreements if that was the price to pay to control immigration. Yet there is obviously a difference between being ready to *take the risk* of termination and being ready to *endorse* termination. In fact, according to the same survey a majority of Yes voters did not agree that the initiative contradicted the agreement on the free movement of persons and would put paid to the bilateral agreements. Had they anticipated the intransigence of the EU Commission, perhaps they would have evaluated the argument differently.

Data from two other surveys conducted in December 2014 and February 2016 help to take a closer look at how Swiss citizens regard the dilemma between immigration control and bilateral agreements. In both surveys we first reminded respondents of the Swiss government’s attempt to implement the initiative against mass immigration and, in parallel, to maintain the bilateral agreements concluded with the EU. Then we asked respondents which goal was most important to them – in case it was impossible to reach both. The results show a clear preference for the continuation of the bilateral agreements over the implementation of the initiative. In both surveys more than 60% of respondents favour the bilateral agreements, and about 35% favour regaining control over immigration. More recent surveys got similar results.

In addition to this prospective question we also introduced a retrospective question asking respondents whether they voted Yes or No in the “Stop mass immigration” referendum. Unsurprisingly, we find that voters who rejected the initiative almost unanimously favour the continuation of the bilateral treaties. By contrast, citizens who supported the initiative are far more divided. No fewer than a third of Yes voters would prefer the continuation of the bilateral agreements over the implementation of the initiative. This group will obviously be crucial in the new referendum, and deserves a closer look.

Among citizens who voted Yes, the likelihood they would prefer to maintain the status quo increases with trust in government and age. While the effect of trust in government is quite straightforward, that of age is more intriguing. Older people have had the opportunity to become familiar with EU issues from previous direct democratic votes, and are perhaps more aware of the economic importance of the bilateral agreements than young voters are. In Switzerland, turnout is far higher among older voters than younger ones, which will work to the advantage of the pro-integration camp.

These results must of course be taken with a pinch of salt, since the prospective question on which they rely is exactly that – prospective. While the choice offered to our survey respondents is very similar to the one Swiss citizens will face when voting on the new initiative launched by the Swiss People’s Party, public debate has not begun yet. Moreover, opinion formation and the outcome of the referendum will also depend on how immigration records evolve. Yet survey results show that the Swiss are predisposed to support the bilateral agreements.

For a small country located at the heart of Europe and with such strong economic ties to the EU, reverting to the old system of border control is a luxury it cannot afford. While the temptation to regain control over immigration was strong, the feeling that it is necessary to preserve Switzerland’s economic advantages is arguably even stronger.

*More on this: Sciarini, Pascal, Lanz, Simon and Alessandro Nai (2015) “Till immigration do us part? Public opinion and the dilemma between immigration control and bilateral agreements.” *Swiss Political Science Review* 21(2): 271-286.*

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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