The Swiss vote to curb immigration, and what it means for Europe

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Abstract
On February 9, Swiss voters narrowly approved the reintroduction of quotas on immigration, damaging Swiss-EU relations in the process. Why did the Swiss vote this way? Does it have anything to do with Robin Hood? And will this impact on the EU membership debate in the UK?

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On February 9, Swiss voters narrowly approved the reintroduction of quotas on immigration, damaging Swiss-EU relations in the process. Why did the Swiss vote this way? Does it have anything to do with Robin Hood? And will this impact on the EU membership debate in the UK?

The proposal by the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) is now part of the Swiss Constitution as article 121a. It was approved by just 50.3 percent of voters. This result came as a surprise, as the last opinion polls before the vote forecasted a majority of 7 to 15 percent for the “no” vote.

Seen from the outside, it is difficult to understand how the Swiss could cast such a vote – a protest vote – when they are enjoying the benefits of an overall excellent economic situation. Switzerland managed to remain largely unscathed by the debt crisis and recession that plunged the rest of Europe into turmoil. The effects of the 2008
economic crisis were barely felt in the Alpine country: the level of unemployment remains the lowest in Europe (3 percent) and the national debt is ridiculously low (35 percent).

**Voting patterns**

One aspect of the 9 February vote in particular defies a rational explanation of political behaviour. Cantons that have the highest rate of immigrants, and the highest level of unemployment, voted *en masse* against the initiative (and thus against the introduction of immigration quotas), while those least concerned by immigration and unemployment clearly voted in favour.

![Chart showing voting patterns](image)

This suggests that identity elements played a key role in voting preferences. The referendum showed a clear divide between the different language regions of the country, and between more urban and less urban zones. A majority in the German- and Italian-speaking parts voted for the immigration curb, while French-speaking cantons voted against. Yet, Swiss-German cities such as Zurich, Bern and Basel rejected the proposal, while some Swiss-French suburbs, little towns and rural communities were in favour. Historically, German-speaking Switzerland has been more self-focused and in need of affirming its own identity, for example through the wide use of the *Schwyzerdütsch* dialect. The same could be said of Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton, which was the most overwhelmingly in favour of the referendum. In various polls, people in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland tend to feel more at threat culturally, from Germany or Italy. In the Romandie (French part), on the other hand, French cultural influence is not necessarily seen as a bad thing. One doesn't feel the need for so much protection.

[9] Click to enlarge. Source: [Martin Grandjean](http://martingrandjean.ch) [10].
A typically Swiss xenophobic vote?

Outside Switzerland, two types of explanation were offered for the February 9 result. The first is essentialist and often appeared in the British press. For example, in The Economist, there were many references [11] to the "Swiss reputation for doughty independence since the days of William Tell". This explanation is as subtle as analysing support for UKIP through a throwback to Robin Hood. In other European countries such as France, the idea of Swiss xenophobia was emphasized. For instance, the daily Libération dedicated its cover [12] to the "Swiss virus" and French Minister Arnaud Montebourg spoke of a "Le Pen-isation of the mind".

So was the Swiss vote a victory for populist xenophobia? Partly yes, partly no. On the one hand, the “yes” vote was indeed populist because the arguments of the Swiss People’s Party were simplistic, denied the complexity of the matter, and cajoled the “true” Swiss people against the Europhile and out of touch elites. The vote was also xenophobic because all of the (relatively small) problems of Switzerland were blamed on foreigners – particularly Muslims. The blame game encompassed everything, from the shortage and high price of accommodation, social dumping and criminality to increasing traffic jams and overcrowded trains.

On the other hand, the referendum responded to genuine concerns over Switzerland’s mushrooming population, which grew 14 percent between 2000 and 2013. In 2001, as the Swiss-EU Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons was about to come into effect, the Swiss government estimated that the country would welcome around 8,000 immigrants per year – this figure turned out to be 77,000 on average every year. For a population of 8 million people, this represents an increase of one percent per year. To give a comparison with Britain, this would mean a yearly influx of 650,000 people. Today, foreigners constitute 23.5 percent of Switzerland’s population, as against 12 percent in the UK.

These few facts help explain why traditional populist xenophobic arguments were successful this time around - contrary to their failure in numerous previous referendums on immigration or the relationship with the EU.

Future relations with the EU and “Trompe-l’œil” quotas

No matter what its causes, the Swiss vote has soured relations with the European Union. The popular initiative reintroduces quotas, as well as national preference for filling job vacancies. Quite obviously, immigration caps are incompatible with the free movement of people agreement whereby EU nationals are free to work or live in Switzerland. The EU could now legally cancel a series of key bilateral agreements (this is referred to as the Guillotine clause). It has, in fact, already suspended participation in the Erasmus exchange programme for Swiss students and cut European funding to Swiss universities. Other agreements such as Switzerland’s participation in the Schengen area may also be terminated.

The initiative forces Switzerland to renegotiate its bilateral accord on the free movement of people with the EU within three years. Because the SVP’s initiative runs contrary not only to the letter but also to the spirit of the agreement with the EU, there is little hope for EU concessions on contending issues such as family reunification or national preference. There is indeed not much room for manoeuvre for the Swiss government, and the job of Swiss diplomats looks like a mission impossible.

One way out, however, could be the introduction of “trompe-l’œil” quotas. There, the Swiss government could take advantage of the vague phrasing of the popular initiative, which doesn't mention precise immigration quotas, specifying only that these should be set by taking into account the “global economic interests of Switzerland”. Bern could, for example, set ceilings high enough to absorb more or less all flows from the EU. The mechanisms put in place during the transitional period for the implementation of the free movement agreement (from 2002 till 2008) could in this regard serve as a template for defining quotas, reinstating border controls etc. It is however not clear if this solution would be acceptable to the European side, including the EU Court of Justice. Nor is it known whether it would be compatible with the demands of the Swiss People’s Party – whose leaders could call for a second referendum if they felt their demands were unanswered.
The British factor

The Swiss vote has also had consequences for the UK’s EU membership debate. This further complicates the Swiss matter, but also suggests change within the EU as a possible solution.

David Cameron wants to renegotiate Britain’s membership of the EU and submit the new terms to a domestic referendum in 2017. As restrictions on the freedom of movement of people are one of his key demands, and in light of the Swiss referendum, EU leaders are facing a dilemma and it is yet not clear in which direction they are heading.

On the one hand, they can adopt a tough attitude against the Swiss, reminding them that freedom of movement constitutes a fundamental principle of the EU, rejecting the idea of a "Europe à la carte" and hence send a clear signal to UKIP and other Eurosceptics. Or, on the other hand, they can accommodate (some of) these demands, accept more flexible modalities of EU association and thus give Cameron ammunition for his referendum campaign. The British PM could then call for maintaining the UK in the EU since he was able to repatriate significant powers on the free movement of persons to Westminster, following a "new" Swiss model.

This new model of Swiss-EU relations, however, has yet to be defined.

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