

Money for nothing? Swiss vote on basic income for all

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In a global first, the Swiss will vote Sunday on a radical proposal to provide the entire population with enough money to live on, no strings attached.

Voters are being asked whether they want all Swiss citizens, along with foreigners who have been legal residents in Switzerland for at least five years, to receive an unconditional basic income, or UBI.

Supporters say providing such an income would help fight poverty and inequality in a world where good jobs with steady salaries are becoming harder to find.

The idea is controversial, to say the least. The Swiss government and nearly all the country's political parties have urged voters to reject the initiative—advice which 71 percent are inclined to follow, according to the latest poll.

Critics have slammed the initiative as "a Marxist dream", warning of sky-high costs and people quitting their jobs in droves, to the detriment of the economy.

"If you pay people to do nothing, they will do nothing," Charles Wyplosz, economics professor at the Geneva Graduate Institute, told AFP.

Proponents reject that, arguing people naturally want to be productive,

and a basic income would simply provide them more flexibility to choose the activities they find most valuable.

"For centuries this has been considered a utopia, but today it has not only become possible, but indispensable," Ralph Kundig, one of the lead campaigners, told AFP.

The amount to be paid has yet to be determined, but the non-political group behind the initiative has suggested paying 2,500 Swiss francs (\$2,500/2,300 euros) a month to each adult, and 625 francs for each child.

That may sound like a lot, but it is barely enough to get by on in one of the world's priciest nations—leaving plenty of incentive to work, campaigners say.

Authorities have estimated an additional 25 billion francs would be needed annually to cover the costs, requiring deep spending cuts or significant tax hikes.

Supporters of the initiative however suggest the UBI could replace a range of other expensive social assistance programmes and could be easily financed through slight increases in sales tax or through a small fee on electronic transactions.

There is little chance of the initiative passing, but Kundig said that "just getting a broad public debate started on this important issue is a victory".

'Eugenics law'?

Switzerland's famous direct democratic system will meanwhile offer up several other contentious issues that have a better chance of going through, according to polls.

A recent gfs.bern poll hinted that 60 percent of voters are in favour of a government proposal to speed up the wealthy Alpine country's asylum process.

The aim is for most cases to be handled within 140 days or less, compared to an average of around 400 days at the moment.

The populist rightwing Swiss People's Party and other opponents have especially criticised the plan to provide asylum seekers with free legal assistance, complaining that Swiss nationals do not have the same right.

The Swiss will also vote on whether to allow genetic testing of embryos before they are inserted in the uterus in cases of in vitro fertilisation where either parent carries a serious hereditary disease.

No screening would be permitted for things like gender, hair and eye colour, but that has not stopped opponents from dubbing the initiative the "eugenics law".

But both the government and parliament support the change, and a recent media poll indicated that 55 percent of voters were in favour.

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