Swiss get behind net-zero climate law

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Supporters of the Swiss climate law point to the dramatic melting of glaciers in the Swiss Alps, which lost a third of their ice volume between 2001 and 2022.

The Swiss on Sunday backed a new climate bill aimed at steering their country of melting glaciers towards carbon neutrality by 2050.

Leading Swiss glaciologist Matthias Huss, who has closely followed the glaciers' decline, hailed in a tweet the "strong signal" sent by Sunday's vote, saying he was "very happy the arguments of climate science were heard".

Socialist Party parliamentarian Valerie Piller Carrard celebrated the vote as "an important step for future generations".

A full 59.1 percent of voters supported the new law, which will require Switzerland to slash its dependence on imported oil and gas and scale up the development and use of greener and more homegrown alternatives.

Voters also backed adopting a global minimum tax rate of 15 percent for multinational corporations in a second referendum, with 78.5 percent in favour.

Voter participation in the referendums stood at around 42 percent.

Recent opinion polls had indicated strong but slipping support for the climate bill in the context of a campaign around electricity shortages and economic ruin driven by the populist right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), the only Swiss party against the climate bill.

Supporters said the law was needed to ensure energy security and independence, and to help address the ravages of climate change—highlighted by the melting of glaciers in the Swiss Alps. They have lost a third of their ice volume between 2001 and 2022.

Climate-friendly alternatives

Energy has long been a tricky issue in Switzerland. It imports around three quarters of its energy, with all the oil and natural gas consumed coming from abroad.

Concerns around Switzerland's reliance on external energy sources have been swelling since Russia's invasion of Ukraine threw into doubt Swiss access to much of the foreign energy it uses.

Climate activists had initially wanted to push for a total ban on all oil and gas consumption in Switzerland by 2050.

But the government baulked at the idea of a ban, drawing up instead a counter-proposal including other elements from the activists' so-called Glacier Initiative.

The text promises financial support of two billion Swiss francs ($2.2 billion) over a decade to promote the replacement of gas or oil heating systems with climate-friendly alternatives, as well as aid to push businesses towards green innovation.

Nearly all of Switzerland's major parties supported the bill, except the SVP—the country's largest party—which triggered the referendum against what it dismissed as the "electricity-wasting law".

It warned the bill's goal of achieving climate neutrality in just over a quarter-century would effectively mean a fossil fuel ban, which it claims would threaten energy access and send household electricity bills soaring.

The SVP voiced disappointment on Sunday, with campaign chief Michael Graber insisting to Swiss daily 20 Minutes that "the bill for adopting this law will be presented much later".

His colleague Kevin Grangier said the result should not be seen as a failure for the SVP, "but rather as a failure for the (Swiss) pocketbook".

The SVP, which just two years ago managed to block a similar law that would have curbed greenhouse gas emissions, also highlighted that backing for the new climate bill was uneven.

There appeared to be far less support in rural regions—seven of the 26 cantons voted against the law—where there are concerns over wind turbines littering landscapes and the impact of dwindling access to fossil fuels on mobility.

Support meanwhile was particularly strong in urban areas like Geneva, where nearly 75 percent of voters backed the law.

Corporate tax hike

The backing was far more uniform in the second referendum on hiking the tax rate for large businesses, with all cantons in favour.

Finance Minister Karin Keller-Sutter hailed the "very strong acceptance rate" for the plan to amend the constitution so Switzerland can join the international agreement. The agreement, led by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), calls for a global minimum 15 percent tax rate on multinationals.

If Switzerland had not joined in, she pointed out, it risked missing out on significant revenues, as other countries could slap the obligatory additional taxes on large corporations based on its soil.

Until now, many cantons have imposed some of the lowest corporate tax rates in the world, in what they often said was needed to attract businesses in the face of high wages and location costs.

The Swiss government will begin imposing the new tax next year—and estimates that additional revenues could amount to between 1.0 and 2.5 billion Swiss francs in the first year alone.