



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on February 16, 2011

Swiss Voters Turn Back Gun Control Referendum

On February 13 voters in Switzerland turned back a proposal that would have tightened controls on firearms possession and use in a country where a large share of the homes have at least one gun and where learning to shoot and handle a rifle for defense of country (as well as sport) is a right of passage for every Swiss male.

Gun enthusiasts and sport shooters were joined by officers and supporters of the country's citizen militia in applauding the 57 percent majority vote in favor of keeping the country's historic right of private firearms possession, a unique position in Europe, where most governments consider guns evil and those who possess them (other than law enforcement and military personnel) criminal.



A recent Swiss survey on gun ownership found that the country's eight million residents hold between 2.3 million and 4.5 million firearms, trailing only the U.S. and Yemen in the number of guns per capita.

Swiss lawmaker Pius Segmueller, a former commander of the Vatican's famed Swiss Guard, called the vote "an important sign of confidence in our soldiers," referring to the Swiss law that requires every able-bodied young man to be part of the national militia and which allows them to retain possession of their state-issued firearms, even after their military service is concluded.

Firearms are used regularly in citizen militia drills as well as for recreational target practice and shooting competitions, "so it is not unusual to see civilian men and women, as well as soldiers, with rifles slung across their shoulders, on bikes, buses or trains," reported [Time](#) magazine. "In some shooting clubs, children as young as 12 learn sharpshooting and go on to participate in youth rifle competitions around the country. Much of this tradition is based on trust the government places in its citizens to act responsibly. 'We feel it's our patriotic and civic duty to use the guns wisely,' Felix Endrich, a spokesman for the Swiss Armed Forces, told TIME in 2007."

The gun control referendum, which had been proposed and backed by a coalition of women's groups, unions, churches, and pacifist organizations, called for banning military firearms from private residences, as well as establishing a nationwide firearms database and implementing stricter licensing of guns — all for the supposed purpose of addressing an increase in suicides and gun violence in the country.

"If you make firearms less accessible there will be fewer suicides," declared Elsa Kurz of the Geneva-based organization Stop Suicide, one of the groups pushing for the tighter controls.

Time magazine quoted Ebo Aebischer, a Swiss minister and proponent of the initiative, as claiming that "a significant number of suicides [in Switzerland] involve a gun" and noting that last year nearly 27



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percent of Swiss men who killed themselves used a firearm. "That's why everybody should have been supportive of this initiative," he said after the vote.

But champions of gun ownership argued that if a person is intent on committing suicide, lack of a firearm would not be a deterrent. They pointed to a 2006 University of Zurich study showing that nearly two-thirds of those who committed suicide and could not use their desired method simply chose another. They also noted that compared to the estimated 75 million rounds of ammunition fired annually in Switzerland during military drills and civilian target practice and competition, there are only about 300 gun suicides and criminal shootings each year.

One of the favorite examples cited by those pushing for the gun control initiative was a 2001 shooting rampage in which a man walked into a city meeting in the community of Zug and killed 14 individuals — as well as himself — with a Swiss army SG 550, one of the firearms commonly kept by Swiss residents in their homes.

Gun proponents, however, noted that in spite of the millions of military and other firearms in the hands of Switzerland's civilian population, gun murders are extremely rare, with only 24 in 2009 — or approximately 0.3 gun homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. "This whole discussion about suicide figures and violence in households was a very insidious trick," said Hermann Suter of proTELL, Switzerland's premier gun group. He suggested that the gun control proposal was a conspiracy forwarded by "socialist and neo-Marxist groups to destroy our army and all the shooting traditions."

But in a nation where "the right to bear arms is firmly linked to the national myth of William Tell ... and to Swiss pluck against the Nazis during World War II," reported the [Associated Press](#) (AP), the measure "had little chance of winning over the independent-minded Swiss, who have resisted the lure of joining the European Union and recently shocked the world with a vote to ban the construction of minarets," the distinctive architectural feature of Islamic mosques.

"Switzerland is different," Dora Andres, president of Switzerland's sport shooting association, told the AP. "In many countries the government doesn't trust its citizens and feels it has to protect them. In Switzerland, because we have a system of popular referendums, the state has to have faith in its citizens."

Markus Mueller, a spokesman for a group of current and retired Swiss military officers, told the AP before the vote that the "real purpose of this initiative is to weaken the militia army and withdraw the state's confidence in its citizens," adding that "only a disarmed people can be oppressed. That's why we're against this."

While news of the common-sense vote by the Swiss people attracted little attention from news sources or Second Amendment groups in the U.S., at least one writer in Canada applauded the vote. Noting that Swiss gun control advocates had trotted out the same arguments that have been successfully used to pass tighter gun laws in Canada and elsewhere, Lorne Gunter of the [National Post](#) wrote of Switzerland, "It's good to know that there remains a modern, sophisticated democracy that has not given in to the irrational, fearful, anti-factual, gun-ban mentality. Trusting ordinary, law-abiding citizens with guns is a sign of a free country, one in which the people are truly the sovereigns and not the subjects of the government."

Photo: A Swiss militiaman with his service weapon slung over his shoulder goes shopping.



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