

## Switzerland Votes to Legalize Abortion

Last Updated: June 02, 2002 01:13 PM ET

 [Print This Article](#)



By Marcel Michelson

ZURICH (Reuters) - Switzerland voted in a referendum Sunday to relax its strict abortion laws, bringing legislation in line with current practice and most other European countries.

Results from 25 out of 26 cantons, or provinces, indicated 72 percent of voters were backing a proposal to allow abortions up to the 12th week of pregnancy.

The results showed 81 percent rejected a rival proposal to ban abortion completely. Final results were due in the evening.

Swiss law currently only allows pregnancy to be terminated if the mother's health is in danger. But no one has been prosecuted for undergoing or performing an abortion since 1988.

Government statistics estimate between 12,000 and 13,000 abortions are carried out every year.

Figures suggest one in nine pregnancies is currently terminated despite the risk of a prison sentence for the mother and doctor.

Justice Minister Ruth Metzler told a news conference in the capital of Berne she had not expected the result to be so clear. She said the referendum showed there was a consensus that women who decide to have an abortion take a responsible decision and should not be criminalized.

The vote sparked a heated debate in the Alpine country between anti-abortion and pro-choice campaigners.

Across Switzerland, the image of a baby on all fours emblazoned giant billboards. "Mama, thank you for not putting a limit on life," ran the slogan on the anti-abortion poster.

### JAIL TERM

The government, which backed the abortion proposal, said 80 percent of the abortions were carried out between the sixth and 10th week.

But despite the liberal interpretation of the current law, dating from 1942, women seeking abortions in some smaller rural cantons still sometimes have to find a doctor in another canton.

Two cantons -- Valais in the west and Appenzell Innerrhoden in the east -- rejected the proposal to relax abortion rules. But this will not prevent it from becoming law.

"I am happy that we have found a liberal and at the same time clever solution to a very difficult problem in Switzerland," said Socialist parliamentarian Barbara Haering who campaigned for the proposal.

But anti-abortion groups pledged to continue their fight.

"We cannot come to terms with a reality that does not accept fundamental human rights. We will continue the fight," said Christoph Keel, spokesman for the "For Mother and Child" group that tabled the proposal to ban abortion completely.

Of Switzerland's political parties, the populist SVP and Christian democrat CVP opposed the proposal. These two parties, together with the liberal FDP and SP socialist party, are in a broad government coalition.

"I deplore the outcome," said CVP president Philipp Staehelin, adding his party would continue to campaign for special advisory units for mothers considering abortion.

Under the new law, doctors and mothers still risk five years in jail if they break certain conditions.

The law stipulates a woman seeking an abortion for psychological reasons must undergo an interview.

Each canton will also designate the specialists and institutions which can perform an abortion.

In Switzerland's system of direct democracy, many important law changes are voted on in referendums.

Abortion in one form or another is accepted in most of Europe, despite clear opposition from the Roman Catholic church and other religious organizations.

The legal abortion period is 10 weeks in France, Italy, Greece, Denmark and Norway, 12 weeks in Germany, Belgium and Austria and 22 weeks in Britain, Spain and the Netherlands.

Abortion is banned in Portugal except in cases involving rape or where there are serious health concerns.

Ireland is the only European Union country where abortion is illegal, while on the island state of Malta both abortion and divorce are illegal.

---

© Copyright Reuters 2002. All rights reserved. Any copying, re-publication or re-distribution of Reuters content or of any content used on this site, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without prior written consent of Reuters.

Quotes and other data are provided for your personal information only, and are not intended for trading purposes. Reuters, the members of its Group and its data providers shall not be liable for any errors or delays in the quotes or other data, or for any actions taken in reliance thereon.

© Reuters 2002. All rights reserved. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by caching, framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks and trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.

---

[www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com)

**REUTERS** 