

🕒 PUBLISHED 21.06.2022

Initiative against animal and human experimentation: contextualisation and prospective

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PERSPECTIVE

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In the last six months, the Swiss have voted on a series of health-related issues. In November 2021, it was the COVID-19 law and the nursing initiative, and in February 2022, they addressed initiatives to ban tobacco advertising as well as animal and human experimentation. The last of these initiatives could have had a considerable impact on the science and medicine practised in the country. Although 79% of the public rejected the initiative, their responses were largely contextual. Therefore, in order to understand the vote better it is worthwhile taking a step back and highlighting some relevant points for the future.

To understand the context, let us start with a survey conducted in May 2021. (Switzerland participated in Eurobarometer Science and Technology, a rare opportunity to understand the knowledge and attitudes of the Swiss and compare them with those of the 27 European Union countries. The survey was carried out from 15 April to 10 May 2021 and collected responses from 1083 people living in Switzerland.) According to the results, a large majority of Swiss people consider the influence of science and technology on society to be "positive" (93%; EU27 86%). The majority also consider scientific knowledge in everyday life important (63%, table 1, 6 points more than in 2010; EU27 46%), agree that science and technology make our lives healthier (49%; EU27 57%), and that science will offer more opportunities for future generations (65%; EU27 69%). However, the majority do not support science without limits (56%; EU27 38%) and consider that science is changing our lives too fast (38% relative majority; EU27 57%).

Table 1. Attitudes towards science (in % per item, in brackets change compared to the Eurobarometer Science and Technology 2010 (https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/806))			
	Agree	Disagree	Undecided
In my daily life, it is not important to know about science	19 (-12)	63% (+6)	18
Science and technology make our lives healthier	49 (-9)	13 (+2)	38
Thanks to science and technology, there will be more opportunities for future generations	65 (-12)	13 (+2)	22
There should be no limit to what science is allowed to investigate	28 (-6)	56 (+2)	16
Science makes our ways of life change too fast	38 (-14)	32 (+5)	30
Scientists should intervene in political debate to ensure that decisions take into account scientific evidence	73 (-)	10 (-)	17
We can no longer trust scientists to tell the truth about controversial scientific and technological issues because they depend more and more on money from industry	51 (-11)	25 (+7)	24
Scientists spend sufficient time meeting people like me to explain their work	25 (-)	41 (-)	34
(-) Not asked in 2010			

The Swiss have certain expectations of scientists. Most want scientists to be involved in political debate (73%; EU27 68%) but believe that trust in scientists is undermined by their industry funding (51%; EU27 50%) and that scientists do not spend enough time explaining their work (41%; EU27 51%).

Returning to the subject of this article (the recent health-related votes), the November 2021 vote was exceptional in terms of the interest generated, the [intensity of media coverage, the emotion and virulence during the campaign](https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:d9ba41f4-ca03-4b5f-988c-8861878085a8/Abstimmungsmonitor_November_2021.pdf) (https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:d9ba41f4-ca03-4b5f-988c-8861878085a8/Abstimmungsmonitor_November_2021.pdf), and the turnout (66%). Its analysis showed how the influence of the pandemic led to politicisation of the Swiss population, how confidence in so-called conventional medicine influenced the vote on nursing, and how confidence in the Federal Council and the Federal Office of Public Health influenced the vote on the COVID law.

While the pandemic continued in [February 2022](https://www.admin.ch/gov/fr/start/dokumentation/abstimmungen/20220213.html) (<https://www.admin.ch/gov/fr/start/dokumentation/abstimmungen/20220213.html>), the campaign was much calmer. Among the various issues up for vote, the initiative to ban animal and human experimentation was relegated to the background, particularly in favour of the media initiative. There are [two possible explanations](https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:05f25cf1-569f-4df8-ba02-141ce4d47d5c/Abstimmungsmonitor_Februar_2022.pdf) (https://www.foeg.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:05f25cf1-569f-4df8-ba02-141ce4d47d5c/Abstimmungsmonitor_Februar_2022.pdf) for this: first, the unanimity of

the authorities and parties against it, and second, the lack of people or organisations available to support it in the public arena, while many from the scientific world were expressing their opposition. According to the [post-election analysis](https://vox.gfsbern.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/d_vox_schlussbericht_feb_2022_v2_def.pdf) (https://vox.gfsbern.ch/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/d_vox_schlussbericht_feb_2022_v2_def.pdf), the subject was perceived as personally unimportant for voters, and three categories of motivation for rejecting the initiative stood out: its uselessness (as regulations and restrictions are sufficiently strict in Switzerland), the desire to secure the place of research in Switzerland and avoid a brain drain, and the desire to access quality medical care and avoid a two-tier medical system. In the end, the initiative was rejected by 79%, a slightly higher proportion than the last initiative on the subject [in 1993](https://www.alphil.com/livres/1036-992-experimentation-animale-analyse-de-la-controverse-de-1950-a-nos-jours-en-suisse.html#/1-format-livre_papier) (https://www.alphil.com/livres/1036-992-experimentation-animale-analyse-de-la-controverse-de-1950-a-nos-jours-en-suisse.html#/1-format-livre_papier). No subgroup of the population was in favour, although women, people on the left of the political spectrum, those with a household income of less than CHF 3000, and those with less confidence in science were slightly more accepting.

During the campaign, the extreme nature of the 2022 initiative was often stressed. On the same day, an equally extreme initiative was voted on in the canton of Basel-City: It called for the right to life and physical and mental integrity of non-human primates to be enshrined in the Basel Constitution. This initiative was supported by: the Socialist Party and the Greens; animal rights organisations such as the Franz Weber Foundation, Animal Rights Switzerland, and Tier im Recht; and personalities such as Jane Goodall. It gave rise to a wide-ranging public debate but was finally rejected by 75%.

Is the issue resolved? At the crossroads of these initiatives in February 2022, there could be an initiative to ban experiments on non-human primates (they are already banned on great apes). ([In 2010](https://www.alphil.com/livres/1036-992-experimentation-animale-analyse-de-la-controverse-de-1950-a-nos-jours-en-suisse.html#/1-format-livre_papier) (https://www.alphil.com/livres/1036-992-experimentation-animale-analyse-de-la-controverse-de-1950-a-nos-jours-en-suisse.html#/1-format-livre_papier), 59% of the Swiss population accepted animal testing on mice, but only 35% accepted it on monkeys and dogs.) Moreover, a parliamentary motion was tabled in March 2022 by Meret Schneider of the Zurich Green Party, calling for a ban on experiments that cause harm to primates ([degree of severity 2 and 3](https://www.blv.admin.ch/blv/en/home/tiere/tierversuche/schweregrad-gueterabwaegung.html) (https://www.blv.admin.ch/blv/en/home/tiere/tierversuche/schweregrad-gueterabwaegung.html)). This motion could also inspire other types of initiatives, for example, to ban animal experiments of degrees of severity 2 and 3. The outcome of such initiatives would depend on various factors, such as the context, the other issues put to the vote on the same day, and the parties' positions.

The context will depend on the evolution of trust in science and the engagement of scientists who experiment on animals to explain their work. This engagement should not only occur in reaction to an initiative but should be made over time. [A 2016 survey](https://brill.com/view/journals/soan/soan-overview.xml?language=en) (https://brill.com/view/journals/soan/soan-overview.xml?language=en) showed that three quarters of animal scientists had done at least one public engagement in the last 12 months. This result is encouraging, but the profiles of the scientists involved would benefit from being expanded from the traditional "male professor" to include other people, such as animal caretakers, veterinarians, doctoral students and, more broadly, people of both sexes. Furthermore, the level of engagement says nothing about the content of the exchange: does the scientist talk

about animal experimentation or just the scientific results obtained? It is necessary to cover both to achieve the new goals of dialogue, openness and transparency.

The author has completed and submitted the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors form for disclosure of potential conflicts of interest. No potential conflict of interest was disclosed.

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