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Swiss refuse to ease citizenship laws

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Voters in Switzerland rejected a proposal to liberalise tough rules on citizenship in a national referendum today. In an outcome revealing the deep divide between the country's French and more conservative German-speaking regions, two government-backed proposals failed to win support in a majority of the Alpine country's 26 cantons (states), official results showed.

With the count completed in most cantons, 13 were against and six in favour. Under Swiss law, referendums need a majority of cantons and of the popular vote to pass. Projections by public broadcaster SRG-SSR based on a partial count showed 51% of voters against a proposal to ease naturalisation rules for foreigners raised and schooled there. In a separate poll, 56% said no to a proposal to give citizenship to Swiss-born grandchildren of migrants.

"This is a sad day for Switzerland," said Claudio Micheloni, head of a migrants' integration association.

Around two-thirds of Swiss are German-speakers, and stark political differences with the rest of the country are common. The Swiss have dubbed that split the "roestigraben" or "hash-brown divide", because the dish is so common in German-speaking Switzerland and less popular in French-speaking regions.

About 20% of the 7.2 million people living in Switzerland are foreigners – one of the highest proportions in Europe, partly because Swiss law makes citizenship relatively hard to obtain. Foreigners have to wait at least 12 years. Swiss-born children and even grandchildren of immigrants do not qualify automatically.

Under the two separate government proposals, the grandchildren would have received citizenship automatically, and children born in Switzerland – or at least raised there from an early age – would quickly have become eligible.

Voters had been predicted to back the first proposal strongly, but a closer result was widely expected for the second.

Right-wing opponents claimed the changes would undermine what it means to be Swiss. They faced widespread condemnation for their campaign, which featured Osama bin Laden's photo on a Swiss ID card and advertisements claiming Switzerland could be taken over by Muslims.