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Family-friendly policy comes to a vote [1]

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EXCERPTS:

A proposed amendment to the Swiss constitution aims to improve conditions for parents wishing to combine work and family. However, critics say it may simply be an additional tax burden and represent unnecessary interference by the state.

The wording of the constitutional amendment, which will be decided upon by voters on March 3, is quite vague. In essence, it states that reconciling work and family life is the responsibility of both the federal and cantonal governments. If efforts by the cantons prove to be insufficient, the federal authorities can set objectives.

Yet, Lucrezia Meier-Schatz, director of the Pro Familia organisation and parliamentarian for the Christian Democratic Party says it is crucial to create the right conditions.

Insufficient infrastructure, such as crèches and other childcare options, makes it hard mainly for women to keep their jobs, Meier-Schatz said. As a result they give up their careers, stop working altogether or decide against having children.

The politician argues that safeguards to provide families with sufficient support are lacking.

"The constitution has to be amended to answer the needs of families and expectations by society," she says. She says current benefits and allowances, such as maternity insurance, are outdated.

Quite the contrary, argues Hans-Ulrich Bigler, director of the influential Association of Small- and Medium-sized Enterprises.

"The proposed constitutional article paves the way for further spending and puts an additional burden on social policy," he warns.

Extra costs to satisfy all demands could amount to SFr3 billion ($3.3 billion) according to Bigler. Dismissing allegations of outright opposition against making work and family more compatible, he calls for greater self-responsibility of individuals, leaving companies to find tailor-made solutions.

In parliament

The debates in parliament last year on the constitutional amendment pitted the left and large parts of centrist parties against members of the political right.

The Social Democrats, the Greens and the Christian Democrats argued the reform helped close a gap in the law and boosted the role of the family, benefiting both society and the funding of the social security system. They said Switzerland was lagging behind other European countries when it comes to extra-familial childcare.

The rightwing Swiss People's Party - and initially also the centre-right Radicals - countered the move would lead to excessive interference of the state in family matters, causing extra expenditure and undermining the federalist system, which gives local and cantonal authorities a large degree of political autonomy.

In the final vote in the House of Representatives and the Senate supporters won the upper hand with a clear margin. The left and most of the centre voted in favour, the People's Party came out against, while the Radicals were split.

Initiatives

The proposal dates back nearly six years when a Christian Democratic parliamentarian launched his proposal for a constitutional amendment.

His party, which regularly champions family issues as part of its political agenda, is also pushing for further tax breaks for families. The centre-right party handed in enough signatures to force a nationwide vote on measures which would exempt child benefits and education grants from taxes.

However, the Christian Democrats are not the only group active in the field.

The People's Party hopes to convince voters of its own initiative which goes in the opposite direction - aimed at repealing benefits for families who send their children to daycare facilities. The rightwingers want to promote a traditional family model, with stay-at-home mothers.

For its part, parliament has repeatedly extended a programme, launched by a Social Democrat member of the House of Representatives in

2000, to help promote the creation of additional crèches. However, the interior ministry in December announced that the SFr120 million credit package is nearly exhausted, due to the number of requests for financial support.

Government stance

The interior ministry says the planned constitutional amendment to be voted on in March recognises the "crucial importance of the family for society and takes greater account of its needs."

Spokesman Peter Lauener also points out the benefits to the economy if more women keep their jobs after childbirth. The legal change can be seen as a way to counter a shortage of skilled labour and reduce family poverty, he adds.

Until now the federal authorities have primarily focused on alleviating the financial burden of families. But the time is right to make family life and work more compatible, Lauener says.

Asked about the vague wording of the constitutional amendment, the spokesman says "it is up to the cantons to hammer out the details".

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Vote on March 3

The proposed constitutional amendment on family policy is one of three issues to come to a nationwide ballot on March 3.

Voters will also decide on a highly controversial initiative to curb manager salaries and boost shareholder rights as well as a referendum against a reform of zoning laws approved by parliament in 2012.

An estimated 5.1 million citizens are eligible to take part in the vote. Up to 162,000 of them, mostly members of the Swiss expatriate community, can have a say online as part of an ongoing trial with e-voting.

Apart from the nationwide ballot, numerous votes on a variety of issues are scheduled in many cantons and at a local level on March 3.

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