

Zurich voters keep 'suicide tourism' alive

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ZURICH (AP) ? Voters in Zurich have overwhelmingly rejected calls to ban assisted suicide or to outlaw the practice for non-residents.

Zurich's cantonal voters by about a 4-to-1 margin Sunday defeated both measures that had been pushed by political and religious conservatives.

Out of more than 278,000 ballots cast, the initiative to ban assisted suicide was opposed by 85 percent of voters and the initiative to outlaw it for foreigners was turned down by 78 percent, according to Zurich authorities.

Assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, and has been since 1941, provided the helper isn't a medical doctor and doesn't personally benefit from a patient's death. About 200 people a year commit suicide in Zurich.

"It's everybody's own decision. It must be allowed ? they do it anyway," said Felix Gutjahr, a Zurich voter who opposed the ballot initiatives.

Other Zurich residents said they also believe it's a matter of personal freedom, though some expressed unease and concern that Zurich has become something of a tourist destination for hundreds of people, mainly other Europeans, and a few Americans, who each year visit because they want to end their lives.

Last year, the Swiss government rejected calls to ban assisted suicide groups but said it would propose new rules to restrict their work. Government officials have said they want to cut down on suicide tourism, and that a majority of the groups and local governments they consulted were in favor of drawing up stricter rules to govern assisted suicide groups.

The Federal Democratic Union and the Evangelical Party had sought the bans, one of which would have required at least one year's residency in the canton of Zurich before being able to make use of legal assisted suicide. But both right-wing and left-wing parties campaigned against that.

The Swiss group Dignitas helps people commit suicide legally. More than 1,000 foreigners gained assistance from the group last year, more than half of them from Germany.

Bernhard Sutter, vice president of EXIT, a Swiss group that assists people to commit suicide, called the outcome of the Zurich vote a strong affirmation that Swiss voters believe in "self-determination at the end of life."

He said it also sends "a clear signal" to the Swiss parliament that it should lower the legal hurdles for elderly clients seeking its help.