

The parliamentary elections in Switzerland, October 1999

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The outcome of the October 1999 parliamentary elections in Switzerland surprised both analysts in the country and observers outside the country. As in neighbouring Austria, a right-wing party was the principal winner. It was the first election since the introduction of a proportional electoral system (1919) that a single party increased its share of the vote from one election to the next by as much as the Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) did in 1999. However, although the SVP increased its vote-share dramatically, it is important to emphasize that a general movement to the right among the electorate is not evident.

In the first place, the SVP is no further to the right than other right-wing parties, such as the Bavarian CSU. The party's position on issues like refugees, immigration, or the primacy of national interests is little different from most other West European centre or centre-right parties. Moreover, the success of the SVP was not at the expense of the political left. Neither the Social Democrats (SPS) nor the Greens (GPS) lost votes; the vote- and seat-share between the political blocks remained stable. Rather, the big losers were the smaller right-wing parties: the Freedom Party (FPS) and the Swiss Democrats (SD) and — but to a lesser extent — the two major “bourgeois” parties, the Radical Democrats (FDP) and the Christian Democrats (CVP). Further, to an important extent, the SVP's victory was due to newly mobilised voters.

1. The electoral system

The Swiss parliament has two chambers with equal competencies: the National Council (*Nationalrat*) and the Council of States (*Ständerat*). The 200 seats in the National Council are elected by popular ballot in the 20 cantons and 6 half-cantons. The 46 seats in the Council of States represent the cantons.

Seats in the National Council are distributed proportionally among the cantons according to their resident population (Swiss and foreign) using the Hare method. Each canton and half-canton gets at least one seat. As the population of the cantons varies considerably, the number of seats ranges from one (in five cantons and half

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cantons)¹ to, currently, 34 seats for Zurich. Proportional representation with open lists is used in all cantons and half cantons with more than one mandate.

Elections for seats in the Council of States are held according to cantonal law.² Full cantons are represented by two seats; the 6 half-cantons have one seat each.³ Elections in 23 of the 26 cantons are held the same day as the elections for the National Council.⁴ Except for the Jura, the cantons use the two-round ballot majority rule in the double and single-member districts. Each voter has as many votes as there are seats. A majority of 50% is needed to get elected in the first round, a relative majority in the second round.

In 1999, 2,845 candidates ran for the 200 mandates in the National Council, slightly more than in 1995. The four government parties presented more than 300 candidates; 983 of the candidates (34.5%) were women. The total number of lists declined from 278 to 268. Whereas the SVP and the CVP did not run in every canton, the FDP and the SPS presented lists in all cantons.⁵ The mobilising strategy of presenting several lists with different candidate profiles in the same constituency was again very popular in 1999. It was used, however, by the four government parties in only about half of the cantons.

2. The campaign issues

Until 1998, unemployment was at the top of the political agenda by far. At the beginning of 1999, however, clear signs of falling unemployment became stronger. The issue remained a priority only in the French-speaking cantons where unemployment remained higher than in the German-speaking cantons. The SPS, which had planned to campaign on traditional social security issues, thus lost its major campaign theme, and failed to replace it with a new strong issue.

According to pre-election surveys, voters most pressing concern were issues about refugees and foreigners. Foreigners have been a political issue for more than thirty years; refugees since the early 1980s. Switzerland has one of the highest proportion of both foreigners and refugees in Western Europe. Although part of the population showed strong solidarity with the refugees that came from Kosovo in early 1999, the SVP managed to strengthen its restrictive position on immigration policy. Moreover, the SVP was also strong on other issues, especially outstripping the FDP in their traditional advocacy of cutting back taxes and the welfare state. All the other

¹ The five cantons and half cantons are currently Uri, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Glarus and Appenzell–Innerrhoden.

² For details, see Lutz and Strohmman, 1998.

³ These are Appenzell–Ausserrhoden and Appenzell–Innerrhoden, Obwalden and Nidwalden, Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft.

⁴ Elections are held in Zug and Graubünden about one year earlier and in Appenzell–Innerrhoden at the end of April in the election year.

⁵ All calculations are based on the 21 cantons with more than one seat which are allocated according to proportional rule.

parties were rather unsuccessful with their electoral issues. The unresolved question of Swiss integration in the European Union, for instance, never became a key issue as in the 1995 elections. The political left, emphasising traditional issues about social security or ecology, was not an agenda leader in the election campaign.

3. National council elections

After its historical low in 1995, turnout increased slightly from 42.2% to 43.3%. The SVP, the smallest of the four government parties until 1999, increased its vote share by 7.6 percentage points, compared to the 1995 elections and became the largest party (22.5%). The SPS slightly increased its vote share (0.7 points) to come a very close second (22.5%); only 0.07% of the vote separated the SVP and SPS (see Table 1). The CVP, the traditional opponent of the FDP, fell back slightly to 15.9%. This loss was smaller than expected; even so, the CVP was unable to halt the slow erosion of its electorate which, until 1987, had always been above 20%. The FDP vote, at 19.9%, remained almost stable; so did the Greens' vote at 5%. The real losers were the small right wing parties such as the Freedom Party and the Swiss Democrats. With its vote dropping from 4.0% to 0.9%, the Freedom Party (the former Swiss Motorists' Party), in particular, disappeared from parliament.

The consequences of the elections for the distribution of seats in the National Council are shown in Table 1. That the SVP won 15 more seats than in 1995 is a measure of its success in the elections. Although the SPS won more votes than in 1995, it lost three seats, whereas the CVP won an additional seat compared to 1995 despite a decline in its vote share. This form of luck and mishap is inherent to the Swiss PR electoral system. Most seat losses occurred among the small parties.

In many respects, these results confirm trends observed in the 1995 elections. First, voter volatility rose from 7.6% to 8.7%.⁶ This is consistent with signs of party "dealignment" in the 1990s: according to regular surveys, only 40% of voters feel close to one of the Swiss political parties; at the end of the 1980s this figure was about 60%. Dealignment is particularly found among the younger generation: only 30% of electors aged 18–39 years feel close to a political party. We might expect, therefore, that volatility could increase further in the future.

Secondly, the government parties won at the expense of the small parties. The four big government parties shared 81% of the vote in 1999; in 1995 their vote-share was only 73.7%; in 1991, it was 69.4%. Thirdly, a considerable part of the right-wing electorate, formerly represented by small opposition parties, has been absorbed by the governing SVP. Thus, the SVP, taking right-wing votes from the FDP and the CVP, is now positioned more to the right. The political spectrum among the four government parties has accordingly widened, with a clear right (SVP), a

⁶ Volatility is calculated as the sum of the difference in the vote-share between 1995 and 1999 of all the parties divided by two.

Table 1
National Council votes and seats 1999, and changes since the 1995 elections^a

| | Votes | | Seats | | |
|--|------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| | 1999 ^b % | 1995/99 % | 1999 <i>N</i> | 1995/99 <i>N</i> | 1999 % |
| Government-coalition parties | | | | | |
| Swiss People's Party (SVP) | 22.54 | +7.6 | 44 | +15 | 22.0 |
| Social Democratic Party (SPS) | 22.47 | +0.7 | 51 | -3 | 22.5 |
| Radical Democratic Party (FDP) | 19.9 | -0.3 | 43 | -2 | 21.5 |
| Christian Democratic Party (CVP) | 15.9 | -0.9 | 35 | +1 | 17.5 |
| (Sub-total) | (80.8) | (+7.1) | (173) | (+11) | (86.5) |
| Non-government parties | | | | | |
| Green Party (GPS) | 5.0 | +0.0 | 9 | - | 4.5 |
| Liberal Party (LPS) | 2.3 | -0.4 | 6 | -1 | 3.0 |
| Protestant People's Party (EVP) | 1.8 | +0.0 | 3 | +1 | 1.5 |
| Swiss Democrats (SD) ^c | 1.8 | -1.3 | 1 | -2 | 0.5 |
| Federal Democratic Union (EDU) | 1.3 | +0.0 | 1 | - | 0.5 |
| Workers Party (PdA) | 1.0 | -0.2 | 2 | -1 | 1.0 |
| Freedom Party (FPS) ^d | 0.9 | -3.1 | - | -7 | 0.0 |
| League of Ticino (Lega) | 0.9 | +0.0 | 2 | +1 | 1.0 |
| Independents' Party (LdU) | 0.7 | -1.1 | 1 | -2 | 0.5 |
| Independent Christian Social Party (CSP) | 0.4 | +0.1 | 1 | - | 0.5 |
| Others | 3.2 | -1.0 | 1 | - | 0.5 |
| Total | 100 | | 200 | | 100 |

^a Source: Federal Office of Statistics.

^b Due to the Swiss open-list electoral system, where "panachage", sweeping, and preference voting is allowed and there are different district magnitudes, the national vote-share has to be calculated on the basis of "fictitious party voters" rather than on the real number of votes. The number of votes for every party (votes for the party candidates plus extra party votes) in each canton are divided by the number of mandates for the canton. The sum of the "fictitious party voters" in all cantons is used for calculating the national vote-share.

^c Formerly the National Action Party (*Nationale Aktion*).

^d Formerly the Swiss Motorists' Party (*Autopartei*).

centre (FDP and CVP), and a left (SPS). This means power-sharing under more polarised conditions, which makes policy compromises more difficult.

Further, the historic differences between the "frozen" cantonal party systems are about to decline. The hegemonic position of the CVP in the Catholic cantons, dating back to the old cleavages of the 19th century, has definitely eroded. Similar observations can be made about the strongholds of the other government parties. Even though significant differences in the party systems and the relative strength of the parties still exist at the cantonal level, there was a strong trend toward party system convergence in 1999.

4. Council of States elections

In contrast to the National Council, the composition of the Council of States remained stable. In particular, the success of the SVP in the National Council was not repeated in the smaller chamber; see Table 2. The party won only one additional seat and it is the smallest party in the Council of States. Similarly, SPS was unable to break into the traditional bourgeois “tickets”: coalitions between FDP and CVP or SVP (in 1999), securing them both seats in a canton, left SPS underrepresented. As the hegemonic position of the Christian Democrats and the Radicals was not undermined in the Council of States, major policy changes cannot be expected in the next four years.

5. Elections to the Federal Council

The Swiss government, the Federal Council, is a collegial body of seven members elected by the parliament after the general election. For forty years, the proportional distribution of the seven seats in the Federal Council (the so-called “magic formula”) had been the same: two members each for the FDP, CVP, and SPS, and one for the SVP, the smallest party. Following the 1999 elections, however, the SVP is a larger party than the CVP, thus the arithmetical application of the “magic formula” would have called for a change in the composition of the Federal Council. On election evening, a leader of the SVP, Christoph Blocher, claimed an additional seat for his party. But Blocher, who declared himself a candidate, wanted the seat at the expense of the SPS not the CVP — in order to move the whole government more to the right.

The SVP’s strategy did not pay off. For several reasons, there was almost no support for the SVP proposal in the parliament, which elected the Federal Council in December. In the parliamentary vote, Blocher’s candidacy secured votes only from his own party. Consequently, all incumbent Federal Councillors were re-elected.

Table 2
Council of States seats 1999, and changes since the 1995 elections^a

| | Seats <i>N</i> | 1995/1999 | 1999% |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------|
| Radical Democratic Party (FDP) | 18 | −1 | 39 |
| Christian Democratic Party (CVP) | 15 | +1 | 33 |
| Social Democratic Party (SPS) | 7 | +2 | 15 |
| Swiss People’s Party (SVP) | 6 | +1 | 13 |
| Liberal Party (LPS) | 0 | −2 | 0 |
| Others | | −1 | |
| Total | 46 | | 100 |

^a Source: Federal Office of Statistics.

6. Discussion

With the 1999 elections, the Swiss political landscape has been considerably changed. The winner, the SVP, conquered new ground in French-speaking regions and in Catholic cantons. Thus, the SVP can no longer be called a “German-speaking party”. Moreover, the old segmentation of the rural electorate — CVP dominance in the Catholic cantons, SVP dominance in the Protestant cantons — has faded. Indeed, some of the most striking SVP successes were in Catholic cantons, where, in 1999, it ran for only the first or second time. In some cantons which had been CVP or FDP strongholds for 150 years, the SVP became the largest party in 1999.

First analyses from survey data⁷ shed some light on the SVP’s success. It seems that voters who had previously supported small right-wing parties such as FPS and SD, as well as “borderline” right-wing voters previously supporting the CVP and especially the FDP, switched to the SVP in 1999. Moreover, the success of the SVP was due as well to the mobilisation of voters which did not go to the polls in 1995.

In the last 20 years, the centre-right CVP has constantly lost support in the Catholic cantons, where the CVP was dominant for many decades. The CVP still wins about 70% of the vote among Catholics, but it is no longer an exclusively Catholic party. Rather, Catholics are increasingly voting for other parties. Further, CVP’s electorate shares three important characteristics with SVP’s electorate: it is stronger in rural than in urban areas, and it is stronger amongst lower income groups and the less well educated.

In the last 30 years, the left-wing SPS has lost a great deal of support among its traditional electorate of workers. Although foreigners make up a considerable proportion of workers, they have no right to vote. Other workers either vote for right-wing parties or do not vote at all. Due to these changes in the electorate, the SPS has become a party of people with higher education and middle-class incomes, often those working in social or cultural fields or in public administration. While it particularly attracts votes from women, SPS is much under-represented in rural areas.

Support for the centre-right Radicals (FDP) is strong among people with higher education and higher incomes. Like SPS, the FDP had been able to rely on a stable voter base; and, until the early 1990s, it was the principal protagonist of neo-liberal reforms, which brought it considerable success. Today, the FDP is facing problems similar to those facing the CVP: while losing part of its electorate to the conservative-right SVP, it has difficulty in developing a convincing profile in the centre. Further, the FDP failed to mobilise many new voters in 1999.

There are strong signs that electoral stability is declining in Switzerland. In some cantons, the traditional party system has changed dramatically in the last five years. Voter volatility has increased, not only because of changing preferences but also because of participation by new voter groups. In a country with an average turnout of only about 40%, a good mobilisation strategy seems to be increasingly decisive. In this respect, the SVP was very successful in 1999; it was the only party to run

⁷ For further details, see BFS, 1999; Hirter, 2000; Lutz and Vatter, 2000; Longchamp, 2000.

a modern, professional campaign centred around a long planned agenda. The other parties will, no doubt, sooner or later adapt new campaign and media strategies, thus whether the SVP can stabilise its electoral success is an open question.

Power sharing in the Swiss grand coalition of four parties is likely to become more difficult. The left–right spectrum within the coalition has widened. Such rising polarisation might be detrimental to the political culture of negotiation and consensus. Right-wing voters, formerly represented by small parties, are now part of the electorate of one of the government parties. Their pressure will be felt in parliament. Likewise, more SVP support for referendums against government compromises can be expected.

In the long run, three clearly distinguished party blocks (SVP on the right, CVP and FDP in the centre, SPS and Greens on the left) could offer new options for limited power-sharing, such as centre–right or centre–left governments. In the meantime, political consensus among the four big parties brought together by the traditional “magic formula” is likely to be more difficult. This will make for greater difficulty in resolving important but controversial issues, such as immigration and the assimilation of foreigners, and membership of the UN and the European Union.

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