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Youth's involvement in politics

Movements preferred to parties

Experience tells us that the words "youth" and "politics" do not always go hand in hand. Switzerland is no exception. But does that mean the young get no fun out of politics? In view of the large number of "political" youth organisations this does not seem to be the case.

It is understandable that a political system like ours involving an almost compulsive search for compromise has little attraction for youth. Young people tend to avoid the parties, or at least taking an active part in them, be-

Giuseppe Rusconi

cause they perceive them as institutions which take little account of them. The young are more attracted to so-called "movements". These have greater flexibility and provide extra room for manoeuvre by virtue of their emphasis on the ideal in the sense of "all or nothing". The words they use are simpler, with well-known slogans promising quick solutions to complex questions.

This means that in Switzerland like everywhere else in the world not many young people are to be found in the parties. Somewhat more belong to political movements. But most are sceptical about traditional politics and spend their free time on sport, music and young love.

The most important parties represented in parliament do have youth organisations, however. The young Liberal Democrats (22 branches and 5,500 members) at present concentrate on education and economic policy and

The Youth Parliament: 200 young people talk about politics according to their lights. (Photo: Keystone)

drug problems – with strong internal differences on the latter. The young Social Democrats, known as the "Jusos" (23 branches and 500 active members), have come out with a "Yes in principle" to the European Union, opening up to the world and environmental campaigns (e.g. "regaining urban areas as habitats"). They also focus on problems concerning foreigners and drugs, taking a so-called liberal attitude on the latter. The young Christian Democrats (18 branches and about 2,500 members) have not published their national manifesto as we go to press. The most active youth branches of the Swiss People's Party (with about 4,000 members) are in the German-speaking cantons. Their most important concerns are Switzerland's relations with the EU (very cautious), drug policy (No to any liberalisation), the economy, environmental protection and asylum policy.

The Greens actually describe themselves as a party of young people – with priority given to environmental issues. The young Liberals (with 250 active members and about 1,000 sympathisers) are strongly in favour of joining the European Union, are worried about the internal language barrier and want policies more oriented towards youth. Most of them are against liberalising drug policy. Young people are also to be found in the ranks of the smaller parties. An interesting case is the Ticino League. This is a party which may also be described as a movement. It uses simple

slogans, and opinion polls show that one in three young Ticinese sympathises with it.

Some of the many youth movements are active at the national level. The most important is the National Youth Council of Switzerland (SAJV), an umbrella organisation for 89 youth groups – including all the biggest except the young Swiss People's Party. The SAJV organises youth parliaments in the Swiss parliament building. The first of these was held in 1991, the Swiss Confederation's 700th anniversary year, and the experiment was repeated in 1993 and 1994. A further such parliament is planned for the coming November on the subject of "The Future of Switzerland" (see box). The SAJV aims at including an article on youth in the federal constitution and intends to launch a competition to draft a preamble as part

Fourth Youth Parliament

The Fourth Federal Youth Parliament will be held on November 16–18 in Berne. 200 young people aged between 14 and 21 will come together in Switzerland's parliament to talk and live politics from their point of view. Further information may be obtained from:

The National Youth Council of Switzerland
Schwarztorstrasse 69
CH-3007 Berne

of the coming national debate on a new constitution. The SAJV is more important than the Federal Commission for Youth Issues.

Also fairly well-known is the movement "Born on December 7", i.e. the day after the No to the European Economic Area. This has collected enough support in a popular initiative for a new referendum on EEA membership. Together with other pro-European movements it is now collecting signatures in a campaign to reactivate Switzerland's application to join the EU. It has about 1,000 active members. A counter-movement, the Young Association for the Future of Switzerland, has sprung up with about 300 members so far. This is against membership of the EU in its present form and in favour of a "neutral and independent" Switzerland. ■

