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Autor: Ladner, Andreas
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Outlook on the federal elections

Wind of change in the Swiss party system

The forthcoming elections will determine the future of Swiss parties. The anticipated success of the SVP is placing the CVP and FDP under pressure. How long can the magic formula last?

This October sees the last National Council elections of the century. Never before has the suspense been so high, given the unprecedented dynamism of the party system over the past few years. The question is whether the Swiss People's Party (SVP) will manage to continue its triumphant progress. For the first time the SVP may be able to overtake the third-strongest Christian Democratic Party (CVP), thereby placing in question the so-called magic formula, based on the

share of the vote, that has dictated the party-political makeup of the executive since 1959.

Polarised government camp

Since its introduction, this more or less voluntary division of governmental responsibilities between the Liberal Democrats (FDP), Social Democrats (SP) and CVP with two seats each, and the SVP with one seat, has lost some of its lustre. Up to the beginning of the 90s

*Andreas Ladner**

the four executive parties suffered a continual decline in popularity. While this initially benefited smaller parties such as the National Association of Independents (LDU), the Swiss Democrats (SD) and factions on the far left of the political spectrum, more recently it has been exploited by the Greens and their political antithesis, the Freedom Party. The National Council elections of 1995 ushered in a sea change, with the SVP and SP gaining what in Swiss terms was a

significant share of the vote, resulting in a further increase in favour of the four major parties despite the losses incurred by the CVP and FDP. At the same time, however, this brought about a polarisation of the government camp.

The cantonal elections confirmed the results of the last National Council elections. The SVP is gaining a foothold in numerous cantons (Lucerne, Zug, Schwyz, St. Gallen and Solothurn), posing a threat primarily to the CVP. Now, following the last elections in the cantons of Zurich and Lucerne, the FDP is also coming under pressure from the SVP. This has led to a particularly explosive situation in the Swiss party system: no longer is it a case of the small parties taking votes away from the major parties; instead, a "battle of the giants" has been launched, as contenders jostle for supremacy in the centre-right camp.

Fluctuations in allegiance

At the root of these shifts is the changing nature of society. Modernisation

and globalisation have forced the parties to adjust to a changing environment. Having broken loose from its working-class following, the SP now boasts the best-educated voters and is one of the strongest left-wing Social Democratic parties in the world. The SVP, likewise originally an advocate of the interests of a diminishing segment of the population, has charted a clear right-wing course and now successfully represents national-conservative opinions.

By contrast no successful repositioning strategy is noticeable on the part of the CVP and FDP. Admittedly the CVP has taken the path of the political centre. Yet the differences between the Catholic-conservative, Christian-social and the market-oriented camps persist, while the integrating power of Catholicism has waned. By the same token the FDP is finding to its dismay that economic interests are increasingly less attuned to national politics. It is clearly more difficult to politicise without the arch-enemy of Communism, and the idea of liberalism needs to be redefined and updated.

Who will be taking their seats in the National Council Chamber after 24 October?

New subject-specific coalitions on substantive issues

These fluctuations within the party system are also reflected in political differences on substantive issues. The centre-right has lost its homogeneity, while more and more the SVP is taking up an opposite stance to the government and other centre-right parties. The fact that it suffered several defeats at the polling booth during the last legislative period (e.g. distance-dependent heavy goods transport agreement, youth without drugs), even appears to have reinforced the party's resolve to wage war against the "political class".

Rapprochement is minimal in the other parties. One example of a coalition is the agreement between the FDP and SP on drug policy; common views are also held on abortion. Aside from this, the CVP and SVP have come closer on socio-political issues, as

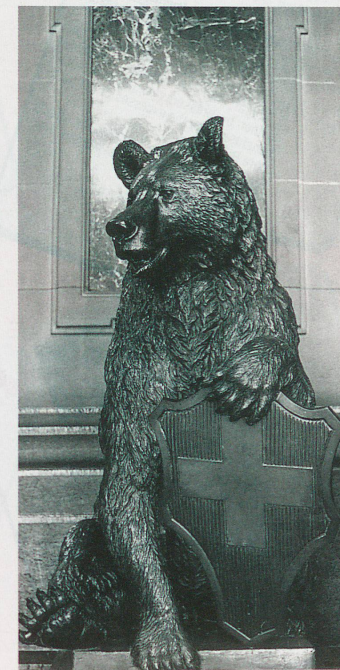
demonstrated again recently in the unsuccessful proposal on maternity insurance. As yet, a policy of different coalitions depending on the issue is far from the norm. Party slogans on referendums in recent years clearly illustrate that the rift continues to be primarily between the SP and the three centre-right parties of FDP, CVP and SVP.

The forthcoming elections are not expected to produce any earth-shattering vote swings. Nevertheless the signs all point to a continuance of the trend that has been established in recent years. Votes will be won by one faction of the SVP, i.e. supporters of the Blocher camp, and probably also the SP, which has no serious rival in its camp. Even slight losses could have serious consequences for the FDP and CVP. No party can afford nowadays to be seen as a loser. The public media show no mercy to beaten parties; the opposite, in fact. Moreover, cracks are appearing in the cement that holds these parties together. The traditional divides that were papered over in the interests of the elections will once more be torn asunder.

End of the magic formula?

Switzerland now stands before a possible restructuring of its party system. A fusion of the existing major parties is not likely. A new party, formed by the losers situated between both poles, would first have to find the highest common denominator, which could lead to substantial internal party splits. On the other hand, the probability that the magic formula will be scrapped within the next few years is high. Before then, however, Switzerland may see a change in the number of seats or a restructuring of the executive.

It is unlikely that the consensus system will be replaced by a purely competitive system. The latter is alien to Switzerland's political culture and is difficult to blend with direct democracy. One possible solution would be the formation of a parliamentary majority with a shared legislative programme.



Political as well as wild animals lock horns in parliament.

*The author is a political scientist and lecturer at the University of Berne. He is currently working on a Swiss National Science Foundation project on changes in Swiss parties during the last third of the 20th century.