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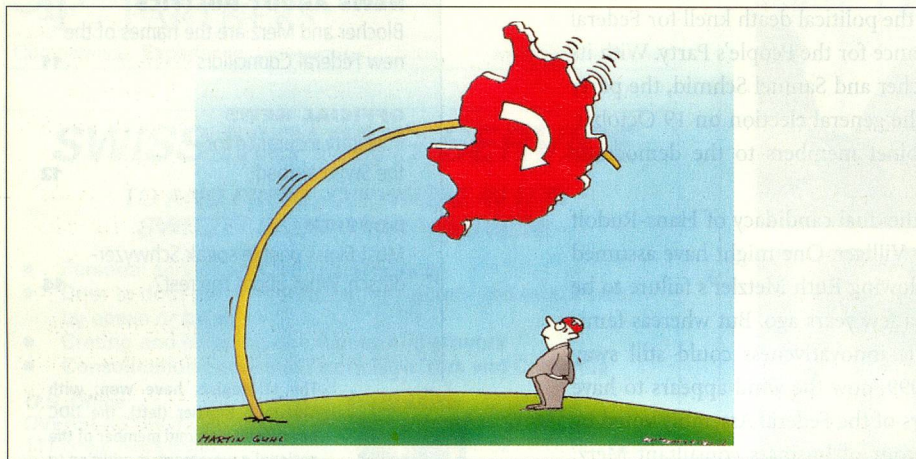
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Political storm clouds over Switzerland

The National Council elections have changed the political landscape for good. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has become the strongest party in the large chamber, and Switzerland has shifted to the political right.

ROLF RIBI



The National Council elections as seen by caricaturist Martin Guhl.

LIKE AN AUTUMN STORM, the first federal elections of the 21st century have shaken up the political landscape. For the third successive time the People's Party was the major winner. "The SVP's triumphant evening" was the headline of "Le Temps" the day after the elections.

What happened at the polls on the third Sunday in October? With 55 seats on the National Council, the nationalistic conservative SVP became the strongest party for 60 years, winning eleven new seats nation-wide and six new seats in western Switzerland alone. Between Lake Constance and Lake Geneva it increased its share of the vote to 26.6 percent. In Thurgau the party scooped up 40 percent of the vote, in the canton of Zurich 33 percent and in Berne almost 30 percent. "A historic result," commented the "Tages-Anzeiger".

There were also significant wins on the left. The Swiss Social Democratic Party (SPS) is the second-strongest political force in the country. While it won only one seat in the large chamber and now has 52 representa-

tives, it increased its overall share of the vote to 23.3 percent, gaining over 20 percent of the vote across the country from Schaffhausen to Geneva, as much as 40 percent in Basle City, and only slightly less in Schaffhausen. But it was Switzerland's Green Party that gained the most seats in the Red-Green camp, winning four more seats on the National Council to make a total of 13, and increasing its share of the vote to 7.4 percent.

Weakened centre

The classic centre-right parties – the Radical Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Christian Democratic Party of Switzerland (CVP) – suffered notable blows. Both traditionally centrist parties sank to an all-time low, with the FDP winning only 36 seats (minus seven) and 17.3 percent of the vote, and the CVP winning 28 seats (also minus seven) and only 14.4 percent of the vote. The Liberal Party of Switzerland, another centre-right party, lost on all fronts (most dramatically in Neuchâtel), conceding two of its six former

seats including its last seat in German-speaking Switzerland.

The outcome of this extraordinary election day is a polarised National Council (the house of representatives) with two strong forces on the right and the left and a distinctly weaker centre. What's more, the advances made by the Swiss People's Party far outweighed the progress made by the Social Democrats and Greens. Hence the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" spoke of a "clear shift towards the centre-right in the National Council".

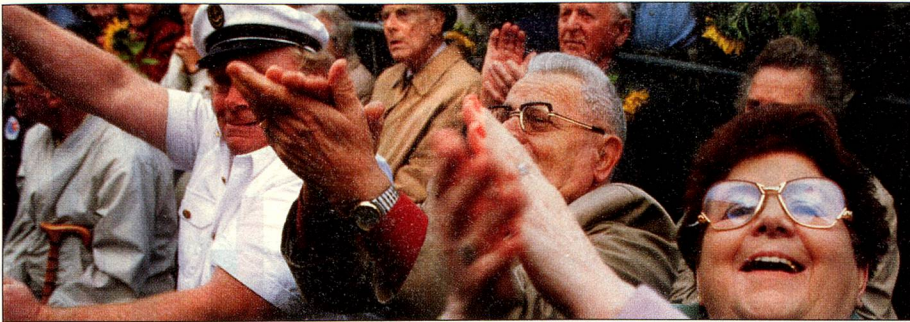
Many cantonal elections for the Council of States (the senate) were held simultaneously, but failed to correct this shift. Based on the principle of absolute majority, these elections resulted in a stable political balance of power. Of the 46 mandates, 40 were up for re-election. Thirty candidates were voted in on the first ballot, and run-off elections have to be held for ten seats in six cantons. Even now it is clear that the FDP (with 18 seats to date) and the CVP (15 seats to date) will hold onto their solid majority in the house. The SP (with six seats to date) remains in a clear minority. "The role of the Council of States as a counterbalance to the National Council will grow. If the Left and Right block each other in the lower house, the Council of States will have to steer them back to consensual reason," said Winterthur's "Landboten".

Reasons behind the landslide

What lies behind the political landslide witnessed by Switzerland on 19 October? Among the media comments on the federal elections were the following arguments: The SVP has become more than just a party for

Higher percentage of women

With 52 seats, the percentage of women on the National Council increased slightly by 26 percent. With approximately 54 and 54 percent respectively, the Greens and Social Democrats have the highest percentage of women, while the SVP remains a male-dominated party with a female quota of only 5.5 percent.




imagopress/Patrick Lüthy

The public at an SVP election event.

protest voters and floating voters. It addresses the concerns and fears of the people on issues such as security, finance or asylum, and it does so through plain-speaking slogans and deliberate provocation. In so doing, the party projects an image that is attractive to broad swathes of voters to the right of the political centre, and this now includes voters in western Switzerland.

The Social Democrats play a leading role in social policy, and are believed to be competent in economic policy. The difficult job market situation, coupled with the current discussion on retirement age and pension fund premiums, prompted undecided voters to cast their ballot in favour of the party. The surprising success of the Greens is based not only on the record-beating hot summer and melting glaciers; many young people and new voters were attracted by this party's fight for international social justice and its anti-globalisation stand.

The reasons behind the severe defeat suffered by the Radical Free Democrats, the founding party of the modern Swiss federal state, are many and varied. The party has lost its leading role in economic policy. The blame for underhand practices by companies and major banks (e.g. the Swissair debacle) is laid at its door. The party has no clear political profile, and its slow decline towards becoming a minor liberal party is virtually unstoppable. The Christian Democrats are even losing ground in conservative Catholic cantons. The party oscillates between economy-boosting issues and social concerns.

The parliamentary elections in October triggered a heated debate on the future of the party landscape. Seldom have Swiss politics seen so much tension as during this stormy autumn. 

See Editorial, page 3, for the implications of the elections on the magic formula.

Canton	FDP		CVP		SPS		SVP		GPS		LPS		EVP		Other	
	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999	2003	1999
ZH	5	6	2	2	10	10	12	13	3	1	-	-	1	1	1	1
BE	4	5	1	1	8	8	8	8	2	2	-	-	1	1	2	3
LU	2	2	3	4	1	1	3	2	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
UR	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SZ	-	1	1	1	1	-	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
OW	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NW	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
GL	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
ZG	-	1	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
FR	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
SO	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
BS	1	1	-	-	3	3	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
BL	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
SH	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AR	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AI	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SG	2	2	3	4	2	2	4	3	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
GR	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AG	2	3	2	3	3	3	6	5	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	-
TG	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TI	3	2	2	2	2	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
VD	4	5	-	1	4	5	4	2	2	1	2	2	-	-	2	1
VS	1	1	3	4	2	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
NE	1	1	-	-	2	2	1	-	1	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
GE	1	2	1	2	3	2	2	-	1	1	2	2	-	-	1	2
JU	-	-	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

COMMENTARY

Concordance is the highest good

A raw wind is blowing through Switzerland's political climate. More than a quarter of the electorate voted for the Swiss People's Party, and one in three voters gave their vote to the Red-Green camp. The traditional centrist parties, formerly a bulwark against a strong Right or Left, lost significant ground.

The SVP's success is attributed to the changing values of our society, even among young people. Neutrality and autonomy from the outside world, less state intervention and lower taxes, more individual responsibility and less of a welfare state, alienation from all things foreign and an aversion to the new: national and conservative values are once more in fashion.

The strength gained by the centre-right up and down the country highlights the issue of political collaboration in the government and parliament. Up to now, concordance, i.e. the system whereby power was shared among all the main parties, has been this country's strength: its "political survival tactic", according to politologist Regula Stämpfli. Concordance brought us a level of political stability that was the envy of other countries. It is the highest good. If the People's Party and its leader Christoph Blocher acknowledge the spirit of concordance before the Swiss nation, then – but only then – two SVP representatives will take their seat on the Federal Council and Switzerland can continue to be ruled by a four-party government. Rolf Ribi

Translated from German.

Slightly higher turnout

The voter turnout for the National Council elections was 44.5 percent: 1.2 percent more than the elections held four years ago. Schaffhausen, Lucerne, Zug and Valais had the highest turnout, and Glarus the lowest.