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The Greens as a centre-right alternative. The Social Democrats (SP) and the Greens are going from strength to strength. Switzerland's five biggest cities are ruled by red-green majorities – at the expense of the Radical Free Democrats (FDP) and the Christian Democrats (CVP). "The Greens are now positioning themselves for many voters as a centre-right alternative," says political scientist Hans Hirter in an interview with Heinz Eckert of the "Swiss Review".

Are you surprised at the great success enjoyed by the Left and the Greens in most of the recent local elections?

No, not really. On the one hand, the Social Democrats and the Greens have always been very well represented in major urban areas, and the FDP and CVP have been losing voters steadily for several years.

So it's not really down to a new environmental consciousness?

No, that's not the way I see it. That used to be the case in the 1980s. Today, all parties include a set of environmental or "green" principles in their manifestos. And it's not as if the concept of environmental protection was exactly enjoying a boom right now.

So why is the FDP losing so many votes to the Greens? Are they turning slowly but surely into a political force of the middle ground?

The Greens certainly cover a very broad political spectrum, ranging from the extreme left to the political centre, particularly in urban areas. But most voters appear not to realise this. For them, the Greens are simply a viable alternative to the FDP – unlike the SP, which is not an option for many voters due to its close association with the unions. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) is too right-wing for these voters and the CVP too Catholic. So, the moderate wing of the Greens is the only possible option left.

On the one hand, the left camp is growing, and on the other hand, the SVP is the only party with a clearly outlined centre-right policy. Is there really a need for a political middle ground any more?

Of course. Not only is it needed – it actually exists. In Berne and the canton of Vaud, moderate Greens in particular chalked up major successes, and they represent the political middle ground.



Dr Hans Hirter is a political scientist with the University of Berne's Institute of Political Science.

So, do the Greens attribute their success to the FDP's lack of identity? What role does a party's European policy play at the polls nowadays?

Yes, the FDP's current weak position is certainly benefiting the Greens. Many voters no longer know where exactly radical free democratic liberalism stands or the direction it is taking, or they are afraid it is getting too close to the SVP. EU accession does not play a big role at the ballot box. But the European question might still be important for the SVP, since many people supported the party on the strength of it.

In which areas do the Greens and the SP differ? After all, the Social Democrats also cover a broad spectrum.

The SP has always been a workers' party and therefore not an option for those with

centre-right leanings. The SP is widely regarded as an anti-capitalist party that wants to nationalise everything. Similar, fundamentally religious considerations mean that the Catholic CVP is not a viable option for many Protestant FDP supporters. In contrast, you have the Green Party: an ideologically untainted party representing concerns that are worth supporting.

Does the basic traditional attitude of voters or their sense of family and background still play a significant role in their choice of party?

Whether or not someone is a member of the Reformed Church, a Catholic or a trade unionist, is just as important as his or her position on how much power the state should have and how much responsibility the individual ought to bear. The Greens are not affiliated with any trade union or religion, nor do they have a reputation for being great believers in State control.

Having lost ground in all its former strongholds, the FDP is now in free fall. Looking back, what was probably their biggest political and tactical mistake?

It's very hard to say exactly why the electorate have turned their backs on the FDP. The political parties have increasingly become a kind of self-service store. These days the traditional fundamental values of the FDP and CVP are no longer automatically sought after. Voters now tend to decide on a case-by-case basis. The old FDP slogan "More freedom, less state" is now just as ineffective an argument as campaigning for a socially-conscious free market economy conscience or advocating Christian values.

Hasn't the globalisation of the FDP as a business party also damaged it, even making it superfluous for the business community?

It's true that the networks between politics and industry no longer work as they used to, and Zurich's economic liberalism no longer plays a major role. Moreover, many top managers of Swiss companies are from abroad and have only a limited interest in Swiss politics, and it's some time since Swiss captains of industry were automatically members of the FDP. Joining the FDP used to be a means of boosting one's career; this is no longer the case. Liberalism is no longer the road to success.

But the globalised Swiss economy also benefits from the Swiss education system and other political factors. So a business-focused party that can

build bridges between business and politics is still needed. Can the SVP take on this role?

No, the SVP definitely can't do this because many of its supporters are dependent on state support. Take agriculture and retired people, for example. It's not as though the FDP no longer represents business interests. But perhaps it doesn't really advocate them forcefully enough: a criticism often levelled at it by Economiesuisse.

Might the general feeling of uncertainty about job security and the future of social security mechanisms also be a contributory factor in the success of the left-wing parties?

I don't think so. Those who voted left/green are not in a bad way financially. No, the vacuum left by the FDP and CVP is the reason for the success of the left/greens. Anyone who is worried about their livelihood and intends to make this known at the ballot box will vote either SP or CVP and not take a detour via the Greens. In any case, the most socially disadvantaged are foreigners, and Swiss who are not financially secure do not vote. This has been clearly proven by a number of studies.

How do you see the future of the FDP and CVP?

Since the CVP has increasingly focused on family, the community and education, a stabilising trend appears to have emerged. Whether this policy is succeeding with the rural population is open to question. The CVP will find it difficult to attract enough new supporters, since it is still only popular with Catholics. It will be able to continue on a small scale but there is no doubt that it is in the most difficult position of all the parties. The FDP will win back votes if it manages to project itself as the party for business, and if it succeeds in once more representing the interests of younger high earners. In other words, it has to take a distinctive stand on transport and education and have its own policy on family issues. Much of today's younger generation see no reason why they should vote for the FDP.

What changes will emerge during the 2007 elections?

I think the Greens will increase their share of the votes at the next general elections by 1

RED-GREEN MAJORITIES ONLY IN BIG CITIES

While the cities of Zurich, Basle, Lausanne, Berne and Geneva are governed by red-green majorities, the SVP continues to make inroads into the governments and parliaments of smaller and medium-sized towns. Women now account for around 25 percent of the membership of municipal executives, and 31 percent in legislative bodies. These are the findings of a study by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office on elections to municipal authorities between 1983 and 2005.

■ Over the past 20 years, the FDP and CVP have lost a considerable percentage (4.5 percent and 2.7 percent respectively) of seats in the executives of Switzerland's 121 largest towns and cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants, while the SVP has gained 2.5 percentage points. Despite these losses, the FDP remains the biggest party with 28.5 percent of all seats, ahead of the SP (23.9 percent, the CVP (16.7 percent) and the SVP (12.4 percent). Centre-right parties (FDP, CVP, SVP, LP) together

account for almost 61 percent of all seats on the executives.

■ The SVP was successful only in the executives of towns with between 10,000 and 49,999 residents, and has lost all its seats in larger towns with a population above 50,000.

■ The Greens (+2.2 percent) have also benefited from the FDP's and CVP's losses. Red-green parties held more than 27.9 percent of seats in municipal executives in 2005 (SP 23.9 percent, Greens 2.7 percent, PDA/Sol 1.3 percent).

or 2 percentage points at the expense of the FDP. A party needs more than just two years to reposition itself and communicate a new approach. And the FDP has not even made a start yet on defining its new direction.

And what will happen to the other major parties?

The SP, CVP and SVP will emerge from the elections on roughly level terms. The SVP cannot grow any further because there is precious little left on the right-wing margins of the political spectrum and it is intrinsically difficult to hang on to protest voters. In addition, right now the party patently lacks a charismatic figure like Christoph Blocher, who as a member of the Federal Council is unable to campaign as actively as before.

Just how important for success is the style cultivated by the SVP: a style that has repeatedly been the subject of controversy?

Very important when it comes to mobilising protest voters. Of the 26 percent who

vote SVP, one third comes under the category of protest voters. They can only be mobilised through pure polemics and hackneyed arguments about what the country needs. Many loyal SVP voters disagree with this policy, but factual arguments alone are not enough to achieve success on the far right. You have to use sledge-hammer tactics. The SVP should be pleased if it can maintain its present strength, since it has no new issues with which to create a big stir. There is about as much prospect of finding new protest voters as of finding a new crowd-puller in place of Christoph Blocher. Consequently, the voter base might start to crumble. And herein lies the opportunity for the FDP.

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