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A centre-right legislative period with left-wing blocking.

Following Christoph Blocher's election to the Federal Council, politicians on the left issued dire warnings about right-wing domination. Indeed, the centre-right parties clearly stamped their authority on this legislative period. Even so, the Social Democrats and Greens were able to block some centre-right projects through referenda. By René Lenzin

Two topics formed a kind of central thread to the current four-year legislative period, which will draw to a close after this year's autumn session of the federal councils: relations with the European Union and the reform of federal budgets. Although each issue created different coalitions, the centre-right line eventually prevailed on both.

Two austerity packages have helped the Federal Council and Parliament to pare back the original spending plans by a total of CHF 5 billion. These measures and favourable economic conditions have enabled Switzerland to remain in the black so far this year and even helped reduce its national debt of CHF 130 billion last year. These savings programmes were passed by the centre-right parties on the Federal Council – the Christian Democrats (CVP), Free Democrats (FDP) and Swiss People's Party (SVP) – despite opposition from the Social Democrats (SP) and Greens.

By contrast, the "red-green" camp won out over Europe, at least superficially, gaining support for the second package of bilateral agreements between Berne and Brussels, the expansion of the free movement of people to include

the new EU Member States, and plans to donate CHF 1 billion in development aid to these countries. However, these proposals were borne less out of a conviction about the benefits of bilateralism than to prevent derailing Switzerland's gradual alignment with the EU. Even so, left-wing politicians have been forced to accept that their long-term objective – Swiss membership of the EU – is further away than ever. It is probably thanks to the SVP and their new federal councillor, Christoph Blocher, that the country is now heading firmly down the bilateral path. And yet the SVP is among the losers in terms of European policy this legislative period, having failed to convince the electorate to halt the signing of ever more treaties with the EU.

All in all, the CVP and FDP have been the most successful parties. Not only have they managed to win popular backing for the two aforementioned key dossiers, they also won the most votes in absolute terms. Both parties may be getting a smaller and smaller share of the popular vote, but there's no getting round them at present in political terms: they have got their way through alliances with the polit-

ical left on Europe and maternity leave, and with the right on financial adjustment and policies on asylum and foreigners. What's more, the CVP and FDP found themselves on opposing sides on only two of the 26 votes in this legislative period (uniform child benefit, and increasing VAT for the AHV/IV).

However, their record was blemished somewhat by a few painful defeats near the start of the legislative period. Probably the most spectacular of these came on 16 May 2004, when the electorate overwhelmingly threw out both a tax-reduction package and the eleventh amendment of the AHV. Three months earlier, the CVP and FDP had already been defeated over amendments to tenancy legislation and a road-building programme that included a second tunnel through the Gotthard. In each case, the two parties had abandoned their moderate centre-right values and made a pact with the SVP that proved not to have majority backing.

Left tastes early success

These poll victories gave the parties of the left a boost. They had set themselves the goal of preventing centre-right domination of Swiss politics, as had been feared following the election of Blocher and Hans-Rudolf Merz to the Federal Council. However, they were dealt several bitter defeats after their initial successes. In particular, they seemed incapable of pushing through projects without backing from the centre-right. Their plans for a uniform health insurance fund and a proposal to divert Swiss National Bank profits to the AHV were both rejected categorically. The second half of the legislative period also proved disappointing for the "red-green" camp. In spite of negative campaigning by the SP and Greens, the Swiss approved Sunday opening of shops at major train stations as well as a new asylum and foreigners' acts. Most recently, the Swiss also gave the go-ahead to the fifth amendment of the IV invalidity insurance scheme.

This legislative period could therefore be summed up as centre-right in essence, with left-wing blocking. Rhetorically speaking at least, the SP and Greens on the one hand and the SVP on the other dominated various votes. Nevertheless, these groupings couldn't win popular approval for any projects on their own, and were limited to blocking reforms through referenda. Over the last four years too, the proposals that received majority backing were largely centre-right in nature – i.e. predominated by the CVP and FDP.

The invalidity insurance scheme can be reformed.

Sixty percent of voters and 22 cantons approved the fifth amendment of the IV system. Turnout was 35.8 percent.

