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SVP on a high, SPS in the doldrums

The Swiss People's Party has emerged as the winner of the general election for the fifth time in succession. The Social Democratic Party suffered a bitter blow. Turnout, at 48.8 percent, was higher than at any time since the 1980s. By Rolf Ribi

The hotly-contested election ended with a historic result on a cold Sunday in October. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) gained a 29-percent share of the vote, its best showing since the introduction of proportional representation in 1919. Meanwhile, the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SPS) failed to get more than 20 percent for the first time since 1991, picking up just 19.5 percent of votes cast. "The outcome of the 2007 election strengthens the hand of nationalist and conservative forces," the "NZZ" newspaper commented.

The scale of the election victory for the SVP and the disappointing results for the SPS came as a surprise. The right-wing SVP won an extra seven seats and now holds 62 of the 200 seats on the National Council. It therefore has the same number of representatives in parliament as the Free Democrats (FDP) and Christian Democrats (CVP) combined, and nearly as many as the entire

red-green camp. Indeed it has fully 19 seats more than the second-largest party in the National Council, the SPS. The SVP managed to increase its share of the vote in nearly every canton, not only in its traditional strongholds in the Mittelland and eastern Switzerland, but also in central Switzerland and French-speaking areas.

What are the reasons for the historically unique upswing in the SVP's fortunes? It sounds out public sentiment and addresses issues the Swiss care about. It employs a convincing style of political marketing and knows how to rally its members to assist in campaigning. It has seemingly limitless finan-

cial resources which it isn't obliged to disclose. And most importantly, the party has in Christoph Blocher a charismatic leader who exuded patriotic sentiments on thousands of election posters throughout Switzerland.

As recently as two years ago, the Social Democrats had aspirations to be the largest group in parliament. And yet now they have

lost nine seats, are reduced to only 43 seats on the National Council and received less than 20 percent of the votes cast. They lost no fewer than three seats in Zurich canton alone, as well as a further two in Berne and one each in Basel City, Neuchâtel, Solothurn and the Valais. The SPS may have proven credentials on welfare and environmental policies, but the

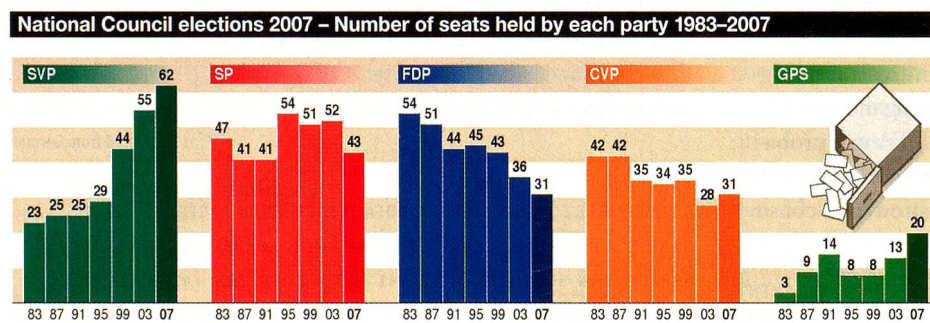
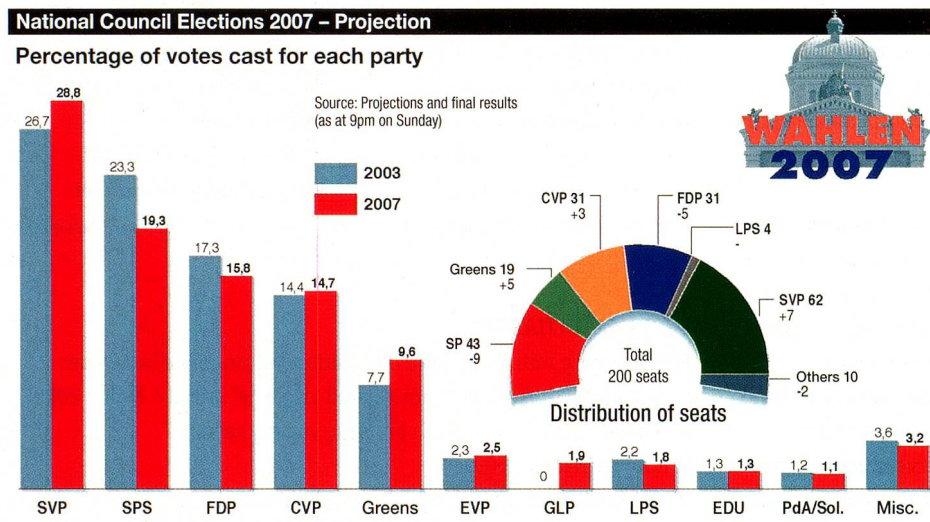
party wasn't able to present its manifesto clearly. As a result, many SPS supporters chose to vote for the left-of-centre Green Party (GPS) and the Green Liberals (GLP) instead. The SPS's loss of nine seats therefore contrasted with the gain of 10 seats by these two ecology-based parties.

The other big loser in October's general election was the centre-right Free Democratic Party. The FDP wasn't able to halt its ongoing downward slide, and shed a total of five seats to finish up with just 31. Despite being one of federal Switzerland's founding political parties, the FDP's share of the vote shrank by 1.5 percent to an all-time low of 15.6 percent. The FDP lost a seat in the cantons of Schaffhausen, Solothurn, St. Gallen, Vaud and Zurich. Meanwhile, the smaller Swiss Liberal Party (LPS) was able to hold onto its four seats in coalition with the Free Democrats.

The conservative CVP was able to make gains at the national level for the first time since 1979, adding three seats to the 28 it already had. That means the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats now have the same number of representatives in the large chamber. Nevertheless, the CVP couldn't quite reach its declared target of 15 percent of votes, picking up 14.6 percent. Because it got fewer votes than the FDP, it will have to temporarily shelve its plans to obtain a second seat on the Federal Council. The CVP won an extra-seat in the cantons of Aargau,



The cartoonist Schaad in "Tages-Anzeiger"





The SVP blows right across Switzerland. The cartoonist Burki in "24 Heures"

Solothurn, Vaud, Valais and Zurich, but lost a seat in Jura canton and Obwalden.

The GPS joins the SVP as the big winners of the election, despite missing its 10-per cent target by 0.4 percent. Even so, the GPS parliamentary group has almost trebled in size, from seven to 20. The Greens gained two seats in Zurich and one each in the cantons of Basel City, Berne, Geneva, Solothurn and Vaud. Although the GPS is a relatively new party and stems from the popular movement of the late 1970s, it is now the fifth-largest party in Switzerland. It is clearly left-wing, but it is most credible on ecological issues.

Stability on the Council of States

The first round of voting for the Council of States did not produce any major upsets. The Social Democrats picked up a seat in Basel-Land canton, while the Greens gained a seat

on the Council of States for the very first time in Geneva. Not all of the 46 seats have been allocated. So far, only 29 of the 41 available seats have been won outright. A second round of voting will be required to decide the winners of a further 12 seats in the cantons of Zurich, St. Gallen, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, Valais, Ticino and Vaud. Al-

though there is a strong centre-right block in the small chamber in the shape of the CVP and FDP, even minor shifts in seat allocation could have a significant effect, for instance through possible alliances between the CVP and the SPS and Greens.

Next up: the Federal Council election

The general election will be followed by the election of the Federal Council on 12 December. Three uncertainties have already been cleared up. Firstly, given the stronger-than-expected showing for right-wing parties, it appears unlikely that Christoph Blocher will be deselected as demanded by the Social Democrats and Greens. Secondly, the CVP will have to wait a little longer before it can expect to secure a second ministerial post at the FDP's expense. Thirdly, the Greens are still a long way from getting a place in government.

POLITICS: TWO REFERENDA TO BE HELD ON 24 FEBRUARY 2008

In February, the Swiss people will be asked to vote on a reform of corporate taxation and on the popular initiative "Against Jet Fighter Noise in Tourist Areas".

The fiscal reforms are an attempt by the Federal Council and centre-right parliamentary majority to lower the tax burden on companies that are their own shareholders. At present, such companies are liable for tax both on all their corporate profits and on dividends. If the bill becomes law, shareholders who own at least 10 percent of a public limited company will have to pay tax

on only 50 percent of their holdings if these are in their own firm, and on no more than 60 percent if the shares are in private hands. The cantons would be obliged to adopt this principle of part-taxation, but would be free to set the rates themselves. The backers of the bill say that it is designed mainly for the benefit of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs). However, left-wing parties and the Greens see it as an unjustified tax break for major shareholders, and have successfully pushed for a popular vote.

The initiative against jet fighter noise arose out of discussions about noise pollution around Meiringen military airbase. It calls for a ban on exercises involving military aircraft over popular tourist areas, although the wording of the initiative leaves its precise scope open. According to the Federal Council and Parliament, popular approval of the referendum would severely restrict the areas available to the Swiss Air Force for training purposes and make credible exercises impossible. They therefore reject the proposal.

Truly historic

The results of the National Council elections deserve to be labelled historic. Since the introduction of proportional representation in 1919, no party has ever increased its share of the vote by as much as the Swiss People's Party (SVP) on 21 October. The SVP even made gains in areas where it thought it was at its peak. On the other side of the coin, the Social Democrats have suffered an equally historic defeat. Instead of reaching its target of becoming the strongest party, the SP now trails the SVP by 10 percent and 20 seats. And despite making considerable headway, the Greens couldn't compensate for the SP's losses. Overall, therefore, the Swiss Parliament has shifted slightly to the right, even though the blocks themselves remain relatively stable.

Wins by the Christian Democrats and the newly-formed Green Liberals have underpinned the camp that generally shapes solutions acceptable to the majority of MPs. Just as in the past, left- and right-wing proposals will only succeed through compromise with the centrist parties, especially since the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats continue to have a majority of the seats on the Council of States.

After a costly and rather heated election campaign by Swiss standards, the politicians can now get back to work again. And they have plenty of important issues to address: over the next four years, the Agreement on the Free Movement of People with the EU will have to be reviewed, financing secured for the Invalidity Insurance scheme, and both the health insurance and AHV systems must be reformed. Other topics they'll have to tackle include the expansion of the country's transport infrastructure, higher education reform and the integration of foreigners.

Following its election victory, the SVP has a right to claim a leading role. But despite its success, it doesn't have an absolute majority and remains "only" a 30-percent party. It will therefore only be able to exercise its leading role if it steers clear of absolute demands and seeks compromises likely to get majority support. If not, it could well head straight into a stalemate.