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Burkhalter becomes Couchepin's successor. Didier Burkhalter, the Neuchâtel member of the Council of States, succeeds Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin. The Christian Democrats failed in their attempt to win back a second seat in government at the expense of the Free Democrats. By René Lenzin



Didier Burkhalter, the new FDP Federal Councillor, was elected with 129 votes.

The Federal Council election on 16 September went very much the way of the Free Democratic Liberals (FDP). The party's two candidates – Didier Burkhalter, the Neuchâtel member of the Council of States, and Christian Lüscher, National Councillor from Geneva – won more votes together than is required for an absolute majority. Following Lüscher's withdrawal after the third round of voting with slightly fewer votes, Burkhalter was elected in the fourth round by a comfortable margin of 23 votes over his opponent, Urs Schwaller of the Christian Democrats (CVP).

The contest was, in the end, less exciting than anticipated. While Burkhalter received the support of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) almost en bloc, Schwaller did not succeed in winning the full backing of the Social Democrat/Green camp. Some left-wingers/Greens may have voted for Burkhalter because they favoured a "true" French-speaking Swiss over Schwaller, a German-speaker from Fribourg. Others probably believed the FDP deserved the seat more than the CVP

because of their slightly higher share of the vote. The FDP also talked of a "victory for concordance".

However, the term concordance has lost some of its poignancy since the end of the "magic formula", and is interpreted by all parties to their advantage (see box). In purely mathematical terms, both the Greens and the SVP had a stronger claim to the vacant seat than the FDP. The CVP attempted to win back the second Federal Council seat that it lost in 2003 by highlighting the strength of its faction and its role as an intermediary between opposing political extremes.

Middle-of-the-road consensus politician

The election of Didier Burkhalter will hardly alter the political balance in national government. The 49-year-old economist has established a reputation as a heavyweight deal-maker who favours consensus-based solutions over political controversy. Burkhalter was elected to the communal parliament of the Neuchâtel suburb of Hauterive at the

age of 28, and, two years later, to Neuchâtel's city government, on which he served until 2005. He also represented his party in the cantonal parliament from 1990 to 2001. In 2003, the people of Neuchâtel elected him to the National Council, and four years later to the Council of States. Burkhalter is married with three sons. Unusually for a Free Democrat, he did not hold a single Board of Directors' mandate before entering national government.

As a member of parliament, Burkhalter was primarily involved with institutional, security policy and educational issues. He now takes over the Department of Home Affairs from his predecessor, Pascal Couchepin, with its many complex areas in need of improvement. In view of constantly rising health insurance premiums, his main objective will have to be to produce reforms to break the deadlock on healthcare policy. An almost equally difficult task will be putting forward proposals, capable of securing majority support, for necessary reforms in old-age pension provision. And finally, little headway has yet been made with the long-term objective of reorganising the Swiss university system. Didier Burkhalter will certainly not be able to complain about a lack of work.

CONCORDANCE – A KEYWORD

In Switzerland's political system, concordance means that the main parties in government work closely together. For 44 years, between 1959 and 2003, this principle was embodied by the so-called magic formula. The Free Democrats (FDP), the Christian Democrats (CVP) and the Social Democrats (SP) each had two seats on the Federal Council, while the Swiss People's Party (SVP) had one. The astonishing rise, by Swiss standards, of the SVP from the mid-1990s threatened to undermine this formula, and in 2003 the SVP finally won a second seat in government at the expense of the CVP. There has since been controversy over the term concordance. There are contrasting interpretations: a purely mathematical one – whereby the votes of the parties and/or the number of members in their faction are decisive – and one based on the issues, according to which a minimum consensus should be reached between the Federal Council parties on the most important political objectives.