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Switzerland in 2011 – solitary, divided, successful, pressured and envied

Switzerland is shifting to the right politically. There is fresh demand for a return to self-rule, and enthusiasm for a more open approach is on the wane. However, Switzerland's success shows that its position as an autonomous special case has many benefits. We assess the political landscape at the start of election year 2011. By Niklaus Ramseyer

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) is becoming more and more powerful on the far right. The Greens and the Social Democrats (SP) are losing ground on the left, while the Christian Democrats (CVP) are also on the slide. In the centre, the Green Liberals are making their policies increasingly broad. These are the results of the first 2011 election year poll on the Swiss party landscape in January. According to the study conducted by the GfS Institute in Berne, the right-wing SVP has increased its share of the vote to an historic record level of 29.8%. On the left, the SP's support has fallen to 18% and that for the Greens to 8.8%. In the centre, the Free Democrats' (FDP) share of the vote has remained steady at 17.7%. The new Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), led by Fed-

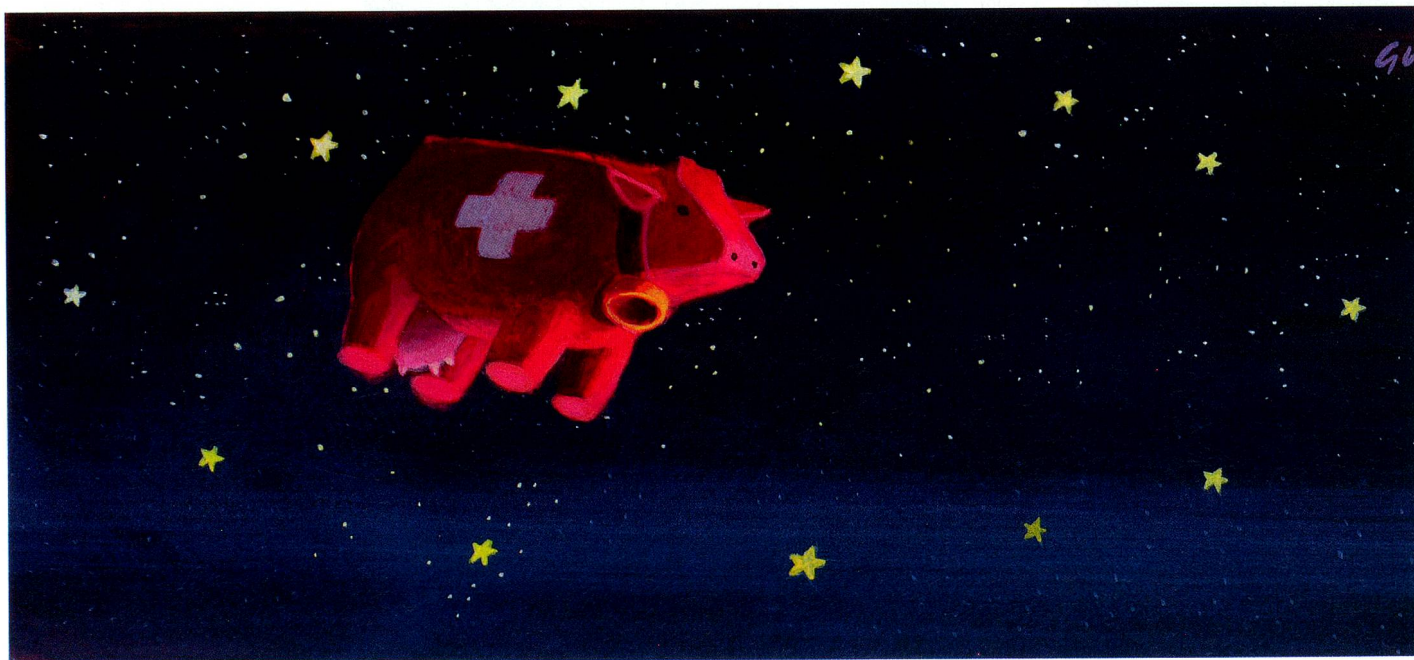
eral Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, which broke away from the SVP in 2008, polled just 2.6% of the vote. In contrast, the Green Liberals (GLP) climbed to 5.2%, while the CVP slumped to 12.9%.

With an error rate of 2.2%, most of these shifts are to be regarded as trends. Nevertheless, the Bernese political researchers concluded: "Compared to the poll conducted in autumn 2010, there has been a significant swing to the right."

This is also the case compared to the last election results in 2007 when the SVP won an historic 28.9% of the vote. The SP vote dwindled to 19.5%, while the Greens took almost 10%. Between these two ends of the spectrum, each with just under 30%, the CVP (14.5%) and FDP (17.7%) shared the remaining 40%

of the vote with the small Christian conservative parties. The Green Liberals won 1.4% – and three seats on the National Council.

The 2007 election year ended in December with a dramatic turn of events in federal politics. The Zurich SVP Federal Councillor, Christoph Blocher, was surprisingly deselected after four years as a member of national government and Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, the SVP cantonal councillor for Grisons, was narrowly elected to the Federal Council. This episode led to heated debate and in-fighting. The SVP expelled Widmer-Schlumpf and the entire Grisons section from the party. This resulted in the foundation of the new Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) in Grisons, Glarus and Berne.



Green Liberals fill the void in the centre

The conservative middle ground is now occupied by two large and four small parties, which together hold 42% of the vote. Alongside the following two parties represented on the Federal Council – the FDP (17.7% and two Federal Councillors) and the CVP (12.9% and one Federal Councillor) – there are also the political Protestants in the form of the Evangelical People's Party (EVP) and the far-right Federal Democratic Union (EDU).

The Green Liberals (GLP) have gained enormous ground in this contest, now holding over 5%, according to the poll. A gap in the market has opened up, and environmentally aware citizens now have a political representative. The GLP wants to continue with deregulation and the liberal market economy. However, it wishes to put a stop to unfair competition at the expense of nature, which is unable to defend itself. It also favours greater selective state intervention to achieve this, and its policies are proving popular.

BDP makes no headway

The BDP finds itself in a very different position. With less than 3% support, it no longer has a share required for one of the seven Federal Council seats under the concordance system. When national government is completely re-elected in December, "EWS", as Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf is now known in Berne, is unlikely to be returned to office, despite general appreciation for her performance.

With almost a third of the vote, the SVP has long been entitled to two seats on the Federal Council. In addition to the one currently held by Ueli Maurer, it should take back its second seat from Federal Councillor Widmer-Schlumpf. The party of Christoph Blocher, who may once again stand for the National Council in autumn on the Zurich SVP list, has clearly weathered the storm after the breakaway of the BDP. It now has almost the complete backing of voters on the right of the political spectrum. The SVP is winning the support of previous non-voters among the large number of ab-

stainers, representing 50% of the electorate in Switzerland, rather than attracting voters from other parties.

SVP ahead in terms of funding and issues

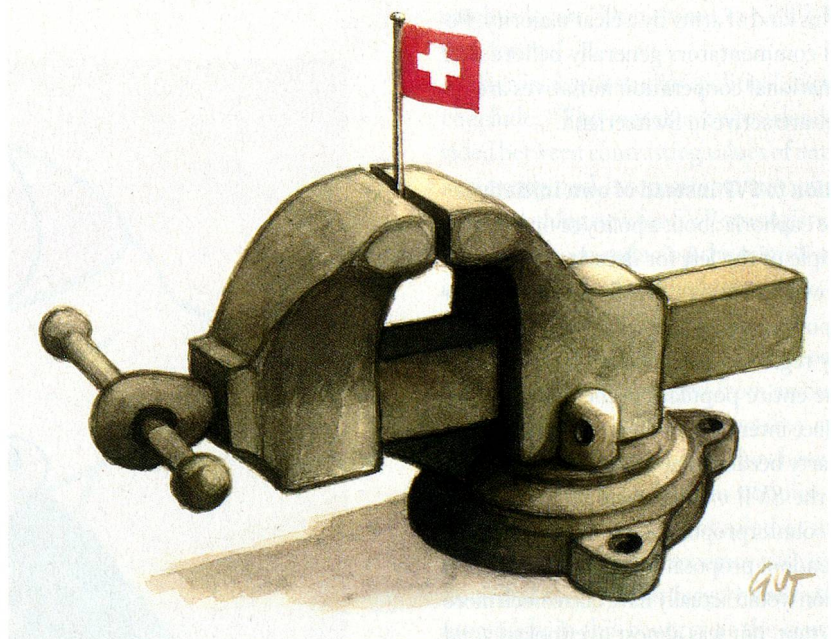
Three key factors are of major importance for electoral success: issues, figureheads and funding. The SVP is only weak in one area; it has very few high-profile figures. However, the SVP is well ahead of its competitors in the other two areas, particularly funding, where there is still no transparency. Estimates indicate that the party, which counts millionaires and billionaires, such as Christoph Blocher and Walter Frey, among its members, will easily invest between CHF 15 and CHF 20 million in the 2011 electoral campaign. That is ten times more than the Social Democrats, who have a budget of around CHF 1.5 million. The SVP's budget is also much higher than that of its conservative rivals, as the CVP and FDP each have a war chest of CHF 2 to 3 million.

In its constant election campaigning, the SVP is handling two popular issues more astutely than its competition: immigration, foreigners, asylum and refugees on the one hand, and Switzerland's relationship with

the EU on the other. With the surprising adoption of its initiatives against minarets and in favour of the automatic expulsion of foreign criminals, the party has been able to attract majority support for its policies since the last election. By putting forward the simple proposition "Don't want to join the EU? Then vote SVP", it is attempting to put all the other parties on the back foot.

This approach has also proved successful vis-à-vis the second largest party, the SP, whose base support reacts extremely sensitively to both SVP issues, according to surveys. At the end of last year, the Social Democrats announced a new, left-wing manifesto. The SP is now "once again a recognisable issues party for social and economic affairs", confirm the researchers from the GfS Institute. It could counter the swing to the right, but in order to do so the party will have to mobilise potential left-wing voters in the autumn who have not voted previously.

However, the SP's virtually uncritical acceptance of the EU and its renewed more forceful call for Switzerland's rapid accession are annoying large swathes of the working classes on lower incomes who have traditionally supported the SP. A proposal from the



young socialists (Juso) to at least draw up requirements concerning direct democracy or social standards in the EU before a new accession debate has proven unsuccessful. The party's call to "overcome capitalism" has been widely quoted despite being nothing new. This stance also contrasts starkly with EU policy, which remains fully focused on the freedom of capital and economic liberalism.

The Swiss trade unions now believe that the EU is fostering a new, Europe-wide proletariat of underpaid migrant workers under its mantra of "free movement of persons". The federation of trade unions and Unia, Switzerland's largest union with around 200,000 members, warned at the start of February that "the European Court of Justice would rule against protecting employees". To the benefit of employers, EU lawyers overturned the principle that "Swiss wages have to be paid in Switzerland".

As regards security policy, the SP leadership had for many years also advocated the opening-up of the country and cross-border military cooperation. The party wanted to move away from neutrality and national defence in favour of a small, professional army. But the party conference in Lausanne put an abrupt stop to these sandtable exercises by left-wing office generals last autumn. The party base unceremoniously voted to abandon this kind of army by a clear majority. Political commentators generally believe that international cooperation initiatives are no longer attractive in Switzerland.

Reaction to SVP instead of own initiatives

The euphoria about a policy of openness, a principle of the left for decades, has waned everywhere. This is also reflected in immigration policy, which according to polls is currently regarded as the "most pressing issue" by the entire population, including the SP base (see interview on page 12). Last autumn, the party became embroiled in endless rows over the SVP expulsion initiative and the FDP counterproposal. Its own simultaneous referendum proposal for greater fairness in taxation would actually have been much more important, but was almost overlooked amid the rows. The upshot of this became appar-

ent on 28 November. Despite good interim poll results, the SP initiative was rejected with just 42% in favour. In contrast, the SVP celebrated an overwhelming victory, which meant that the SP lost on two fronts.

The SVP's conservative rivals in the centre are not faring much better at the moment. Blocher's well-organised party is sweeping the FDP and CVP aside with popular and populist issues. Both these parties are constantly fluctuating between differentiating themselves from the strong right-wing party and taking up its positions, such as on immigration policy. The FDP is now trying to score points with an "anti-bureaucracy" initiative. The CVP has announced a "families" initiative, which has not yet been clearly defined.

Pseudo issues are driving the election

For some time now, more and more referenda have been launched on marginal issues, which are populist, emotive and easy to sell. The SVP has also excelled here. The parties have been scheduling such initiatives as carefully as possible with a view to the elections. They serve to stimulate debate, mobilise their base support and profile their candidates.

The minaret initiative is a striking example. It deliberately focused on the sacred buildings of just one religion. It did not re-

solve any issues in relation to the increasingly totalitarian tendencies of religions, but it nevertheless received majority support. The expulsion initiative, which now has to be legally "repaired" following its approval, is very similar.

On the left, the opponents of the army focused on an equally marginal issue that could be exploited in the run-up to the elections, with its weapons initiative. This referendum also targeted the most emotive aspect of an issue – the weapons of the militia army, which make up less than 10% of small weapons in Switzerland. Such moves are one of the reasons why referenda are not generally held in the last six months before an election. This year is no exception, with no more referenda planned before 23 October.

However, most referenda do concern important issues. Taking part in elections in Switzerland's highly developed, direct democracy is just one opportunity for political co-determination: referenda at communal, cantonal and federal level seem far more important to many voters. One recently published survey shows that a large portion of the electorate almost never votes in elections, but takes part in referenda at every opportunity.



"We are the people!!"

Politics on the defensive

Forty years since the introduction of the right to vote for women, female critics in Switzerland believe that the National Council, which will be re-elected on 23 October, is very selective in its representation of the Swiss people. For example, with 104 votes out of 200, the minority group of entrepreneurs is massively overrepresented in the people's chamber – especially the management levels of large companies with 88 board members (often representing manifold interests) on the National Council. Women are still very much in the minority on both councils. This is having a discouraging effect: “In particular, younger women seem to have very little interest in politics today”, the researchers were disappointed to note.

In general terms, politics has gone on the defensive in Switzerland in recent years, most notably with regard to the economy. This was particularly evident during the banking crisis when the Federal Council provided almost CHF 70 billion to save UBS in a surprise move. It was later explained to the astonished public that the position the major bank was in jeopardised the entire nation. Parliament had no option but to approve the proposal. The Federal Council bowed down to the US government and signed an illegal

agreement. The politicians then did little to counter the much-talked-about cluster risks caused by poorly regulated speculative banks. Direct democracy was left out of all this.

Such machinations caused a feeling of powerlessness among the people. Switzerland has nevertheless come through the crisis surprisingly well in comparison with other countries. Despite a dangerously strong Swiss franc, the Swiss export industry achieved 7% growth last year. And while countless other countries – including the USA, the superpower that is still feared militarily – are perilously close to bankruptcy, Switzerland is posting net profits running into billions.

Autonomy more important once again

Most Swiss people are becoming more and more convinced that national self-rule, long criticised as “going it alone” and “Blocher's policy of isolation”, has major benefits despite all the problems. Political commentators are saying: “Great confidence has emerged in Switzerland's ability to stand its own ground.”

This trend is enhanced by the knowledge that the perilous crisis, which has been steadily overcome, was imported by major globalised banks and that to begin with it dam-

aged and threatened the most important part of the economy where SMEs work according to the principle of “from the region for the region”. The Bernese researchers confirm: “Switzerland has been relatively successful in overcoming the consequences of the global financial market crisis, at least more so than many other countries.”

And more so than the EU is the opinion of more and more Swiss, including the better educated and those in higher income brackets. The first official election poll this year concludes: “It is evident that Switzerland is extremely polarised ideologically by identity issues, with nationalist conservative ideas, and to an extent also nationalist liberal ones, imposing themselves.”

This is putting the conservative middle-ground parties on the defensive. The FDP and CVP are now clearly distancing themselves from, or attempting to conceal, their previous commitment to rapid EU accession or an intensification of the NATO partnership. Both hope that these kinds of minority foreign policy issues do not become major election issues. However, the SVP is playing the EU card mercilessly in the new climate, which is characterised by renewed pride in comparatively successful Switzerland. In the canton of Berne, the SVP candidate for the Council of States went into battle with the catchy slogan “Don't want the EU? Then vote for me”.

After in-depth studies, political scientists conclude: “The mood in Switzerland is divided between contrasting values of national autonomy and international integration.” This is nothing new for SVP strategists; they have long been reducing the complex findings of academics to a simple battle cry: “The Swiss vote SVP”.

The reaction of the other parties from left to centre-right has ranged from anxiety to anger. They are well aware that they are being attacked on a front that they have long since abandoned and left to populist SVP politicians: this is the right mindset in this sophisticated, direct democracy with its multicultural society that largely coexists harmoniously in this country at the centre of Europe that calls itself “Switzerland”.

