

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 38 (2011)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Politics is set to become more issue-based, but also more complicated
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907358>

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Politics is set to become more issue-based, but also more complicated

The trend towards political polarisation came to a halt in the National Council elections. The electorate boosted the numbers of the solution-oriented centre, but also fragmented it.

By René Lenzin



Sunday, 23 October in the television studio: Martin Bäumle (left), President of the Green Liberals, and Hans Grunder, Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) President, are delighted with their parties' good results.

"Who has reason to celebrate?" the TV presenter asked the assembled party presidents, none of whom were women, in the evening on election day, 23 October. Three of the seven immediately raised a hand, providing a reasonably good indication of the mood. The following are entitled to see themselves as winners in the National Council elections:

- Martin Bäumle of the Green Liberals, whose number of seats increased from 3 to 12 with their share of the vote standing at 5.4%.

- Hans Grunder of the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), which also won a 5.4% share of the vote and saw its number of seats

rise from 5 to 9. (The BDP stood for election for the first time after breaking away from the SVP during the previous legislature.)

- Christian Levrat of the Social Democratic Party (SP). Like all the traditional parties, the SP's share of the vote declined (now 18.7%), but it gained three seats, mainly thanks to its success in French-speaking Switzerland.

The other four party presidents had to explain losses but, of course, attempted to put their setbacks into perspective:

- The SVP's share of the vote fell for the first time since 1987 (now 26.6%) and it also

lost seats. The Swiss People's Party nevertheless remains "by far the strongest force", as Toni Brunner stated. The loss of seats compared to the 2007 election is partly explained by the departure of four party members to the BDP during the last legislature.

- FDP. The Liberals (FDP) continued its decline, a trend that has endured in parallel to the rise of the SVP since 1987. However, Fulvio Pelli said that the losses were lower than predicted, and he stressed that the FDP remains the third-strongest party with a 15.1% share of the vote.

- The Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) is following a negative course similar to that of the FDP, winning 12.3% of the vote. Christophe Darbellay was consoled by the fact that the losses were at the hands of the BDP and Green Liberals, centre parties with which solution-oriented policies can be sought.

- After two successful elections, the Greens suffered a setback. Their share of the vote stands at 8.4%. Ueli Leuenberger spoke of his party's misfortune under proportional representation and the appeal of the young Green Liberals.

Victory for the "new centre"

The gains by the BDP and Green Liberals were hailed as a victory for the "new centre" in the media. In terms of policy and agenda, both small parties in fact belong to the political faction between the poles that generally

RECORD PARTICIPATION

A total of 3,458 candidates from the 20 cantons with proportional presentation stood for 200 National Council seats, according to the Federal Chancellery after the expiry of the registration deadline in September. As only one seat is allocated to each of the six cantons or half-cantons of Obwalden, Nidwalden, Glarus, Uri, Appenzell Auser rhoden and Appenzell Innerrhoden, there is no proportional presentation here and therefore no obligation to register with the Federal Chancellery. A total of 14 people had officially put their names forward in these cantons, according to the Swiss Press Agency. That adds up to a total of 3,472 – a 10.7% increase on 2007. Of the registered candidates, 1,132 were women and 2,326 men. The proportion of women fell

from 35.2% in 2007 to 32.7%. There were 365 electoral lists altogether and numerous list and sub-list combinations.

The number of candidates from the Swiss community abroad increased enormously. There were 75 this year, compared with 44 in 2007 and just 17 in 2003. The exact election results for the candidates from the Swiss community abroad were not known at the time of going to press for this edition of "Swiss Review". However, they are published on the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad's website. This also contains details of the voting behaviour of Swiss citizens abroad where the cantons release this information. www.aso.ch

All results are updated on the following website – www.ch.ch. (BE)

seeks solutions acceptable to a majority of the people. One example is an issue that Switzerland will focus on intensively over the coming years: the BDP and Green Liberals are unconditionally committed to the bilateral agreements with the EU and, above all, to the free movement of persons – accomplishments that EU opponents on the right and some advocates of EU accession on the left call into question.

In the past, the FDP and CVP were the political forces that put their stamp on legislation with their solution-oriented, pragmatic policies, sometimes cooperating with the left and sometimes with the right. Both parties made up for their numerical inferiority in the National Council with their dominance in the Council of States. Together with direct democracy, the characteristics of the Swiss bicameral system ensure that radical proposals are hardly ever adopted.

Now, the BDP and Green Liberals also belong to this consensus-oriented centre, which has become broader overall. In combination with the weakening of the poles, this strengthening of the centre should ensure more issue-based politics. However, at the same time the centre is at risk of fragmenting, which may make the search for solutions more difficult. Aside from personal animosity between the party representatives, different interests and priorities exist, which will be reflected in the Federal Council elections on 14 December (see page 16).

There are issues for which common solutions are not possible because differences on policy are so great. These include nu-

clear power, on which the FDP holds a different view to the CVP, BDP and Green Liberals, which all favour withdrawal. A centre-left alliance, which has been strengthened overall by the elections, will have a major bearing on this issue over the coming four years. In addition to energy policy, Europe, old-age pension provision and the future of the financial centre will be among the big issues of the forthcoming legislature. Healthcare will also remain a key project. Foreigners and immigration will continue to be topical, not least because of the SVP's popular initiative in this area. It remains to be seen whether majority support can be achieved for these issues, and in what form.

The political poles retain the power to block proposals

In light of the ongoing international financial and economic crises, the new Parliament will have to act quickly to deal with the strength of the Swiss franc and the problems this is causing many export companies. The election results suggest that the electorate will seek concrete, implementable solutions in this difficult situation rather than back parties with absolute demands. The trend towards party-political polarisation, which had been ongoing since the 1990s, has come to a halt. The bottom line is that both the left-green camp and the SVP were losers on 23 October. However, both political factions continue to hold around 60 National Council seats each and can block projects together, albeit for different reasons. This occurred during the previous legislature

with the planned reform of the old-age pension system.

The appeal of new, fresh parties

The question remains as to why two traditional parties, the FDP and CVP, are continuing to decline while the "new centre" gains ground. Certain shifts, such as from the FDP to the Green Liberals, can be explained by environmental reasons. But overall the differences are negligible. In some cantons the BDP is a kind of protestant



A look at the National Council chamber: the new distribution of seats with numerous centre parties will not make government easy.

CVP, whereas in others it can hardly be differentiated from the FDP in terms of policy. The Green Liberals previously belonged to the CVP faction without any significant conflicts arising. So, there can be only one conclusion: the winning parties are appealing particularly because they are new and fresh.

Together, the BDP and Green Liberals have almost an 11% share of the vote. That is significant, yet their success should be put into perspective. These parties started virtually from zero, which makes the gains appear large. Their success is also partially explained by bold list combinations. New parties that achieve astonishing short-term success have often appeared in Switzerland. For example, the Alliance of Independents (Landesring der Unabhängigen) won more than a 9% share of the vote and 16 seats in 1967 – in the same area as the BDP and, above all, the Green Liberals today.

The Green Liberals and BDP are not yet established parties. They are still developing structures and agendas. In some cases, they will be sending representatives with little or no political experience to Parliament. The next election and the one after that will show whether they can set themselves apart from the competition over the long term and consolidate or even build on their success.

Council of States: SVP offensive fails

Only 27 of 46 Council of States seats were decided in the first round. However, it has already become apparent that the Swiss People's Party is unlikely to be able to increase its number of seats.

By René Lenzin

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) put forward its top candidates to contest the seats on the Council of States, including former Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher in Zurich, faction leader Caspar Baader in Baselland, Party President Toni Brunner in St. Gallen and former Federal Council candidate Jean-François Rime in Fribourg. None of the four was successful. Baader and Rime have been eliminated, while Blocher and Brunner must enter the second round of voting. As the SVP has lost its seat in Grisons and is also in danger of losing the one in Aargau, it may actually end up with fewer seats in the smaller chamber than in the previous legislature.

The SVP refused to concede it had failed. Party officials said that greater presence in the Council of States was a long-term project. However, the fact remains that the party struggles to get its candidates elected in majority elections based on personality.

Second round of voting in 13 cantons

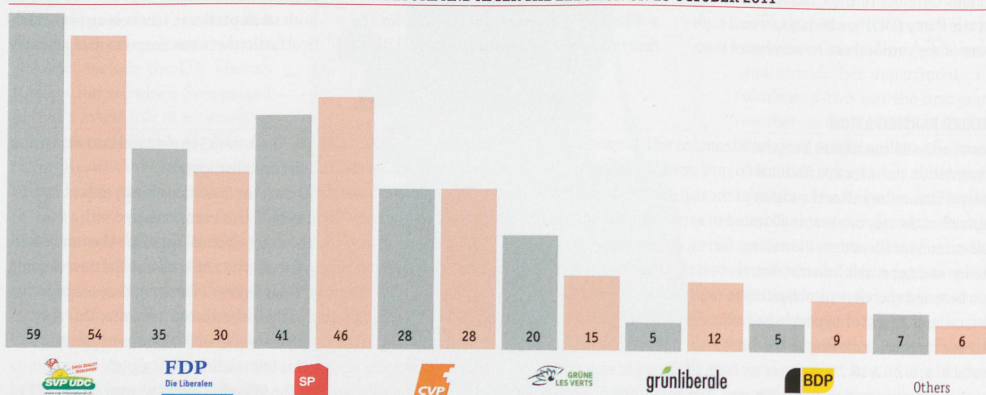
The final result of the Council of States elections and therefore the exact distribution of power in Parliament will not be known until 4 December when the second round will have taken place in Solothurn. A second round will be held in 13 cantons in all between 6 November and 4 December, when the electorate will decide on 19 of the 46 seats. This additional round is required because the Council of States election is based

on a majority system rather than proportional representation, except in the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel. Candidates have to win over half of all votes cast to be elected in the first round of voting. The hurdle of achieving an absolute majority is not removed until the second round.

Even before the second round of voting, it is evident that the Social Democratic Party (SP) is one of the winners in the Council of States election. They have already won eight seats, which is more than any other party. Former National Council President Pascale Bruderer helped the SP to break the conservative dominance over Aargau and to take a Council of States seat there for the first time in 60 years. As the SP looks set to hold its seat in the canton of Vaud, it should win nine seats in the smaller chamber.

The Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) will win 12 to 15 seats, and the FDP. The Liberals 10 to 13. Together the two parties are likely to continue to make up the majority. The CVP and FDP often represent the same positions, particularly on the issues of finance, economics and social policy. The Greens and Green Liberals could win up to five seats. A centre-left majority will therefore continue to exist in the Council of States, above all on family and energy policy. The definitive make-up of the smaller chamber may also have a major impact on the complete re-election of the Federal Council on 14 December (see page 16).

DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE NATIONAL COUNCIL BEFORE AND AFTER THE ELECTION ON 23 OCTOBER 2011



DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN THE COUNCIL OF STATES BEFORE THE ELECTION ON 23 OCTOBER 2011

