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More candidates than seats in the Federal Council elections

Vote out Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf or smash the concordance system and principle of proportionality – this is the choice facing Parliament on 14 December. The second option looks to be the more likely.

By René Lenzin

On 5 December the newly elected members of the National Council and Council of States will commence their first session, and nine days later they will elect the new Federal Council. Six of the seven Federal Councillors are standing for re-election. These are, in order of term of office: Doris Leuthard (CVP), Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf (BDP), Ueli Maurer (SVP), Didier Burkhalter (FDP), Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) and Johann Niklaus Schneider-Ammann (FDP). Micheline Calmy-Rey (SP) is stepping down at the end of the year, leaving a vacant seat (see page 12).

The fact that there are more claims to seats than there are seats makes the situation both tense and exciting. This has primarily to do with Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. The former finance director from the canton of Grisons forced Christoph Blocher out of office four years ago. Because she accepted her election against the will of her then party, the Swiss People's Party (SVP), she was expelled from the SVP and subsequently joined the newly founded Conservative Democratic Party (BDP). This party has now increased the number of seats it holds on the National Council from five to nine. However, this is far

from enough for representation on the Federal Council. Widmer-Schlumpf can therefore only remain in office if other criteria are taken into account.

Two seats each for the right and left, three for the centre

If the Federal Assembly abides by the rules of the concordance system on 14 December and integrates the parties in line with the number of votes they received at the National Council elections, three things are clear:

- Still by far the strongest fraction, the SVP is entitled to two seats.
- The left-green camp is also entitled to two seats. The Greens, however, decreased their share of the vote and lost seats, meaning that they must bury their ambitions to participate in government for the time being.
- FDP. The Liberals (FDP) continues to command a higher share of the vote than the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) and therefore has a better claim to two seats.

It is the last point that raises questions. Is the FDP's reduced share of the vote at 15.1 percent really enough for two Federal Councillors? Yes, if you interpret concordance

from a purely arithmetic point of view, as both the FDP themselves and the SVP do. According to their formula, the three strongest parties should each receive two seats, and the fourth strongest one seat. The other parties, however, are not so happy with this approach. Firstly, because the centre-right block would then have a majority in government despite holding only around 100 of the 246 seats in the Federal Assembly and secondly, because the concordance system needs to take content into account.

Based on all the statements of the party representatives following the elections, the starting position on 14 December is as follows: in principle, the entitlement to two seats by the far right and left, the SVP and SP, is beyond dispute. That would leave three seats for the parties in between, who at the moment have four Federal Councillors. This allows for three possible scenarios. The Federal Assembly can:

- replace Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf with a representative of the SVP.
- confirm the re-election of Widmer-Schlumpf and grant the SVP a second seat at the expense of the FDP or the SP.
- confirm the re-election of Widmer-Schlumpf and refuse to give a second seat to the SVP or SP.

When this edition went to press directly after the elections on 23 October, there were signs indicating the likely re-election of Widmer-Schlumpf: The two election winners, the BDP and the Green Liberal Party, are in favour of Widmer-Schlumpf. Also, the CVP would like to join forces with Widmer-Schlumpf and the BDP – not least in order to inherit her seat one day on the Federal Council. Finally, Widmer-Schlumpf is one of the four Federal Councillors to push through the decision in government to abandon nuclear power. As a result, she enjoys a great deal of goodwill among the SP and the Greens, who – together with the CVP – had helped her into office four years ago.



The Federal Council chamber: the future occupants of these seats will be decided on 14 December. Pictured are Federal Councillors Simonetta Sommaruga, Doris Leuthard and Johann Schneider-Ammann; between them are the Vice-Chancellor, the Federal Chancellor and the Federal Council spokesperson.