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The political profile of the Swiss abroad

Michael Hermann, head of the "sotomo" research unit at the University of Zurich, has carefully analysed the data available on the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad. He explains the results of his research in the following article.

More and more cantons are revealing the voting behaviour of their Swiss citizens abroad who are eligible to vote in elections and referenda. By the 2011 national elections the figure had reached nine – nine cantons in which almost half of all Swiss abroad registered on the electoral roll live. This is sufficient to provide an accurate overall projection of the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad at elections and referenda. Our projection model for the share of the vote at the National Council elections reveals a party-political profile that does not differ greatly from that of the Swiss at home, but does however possess some distinctive characteristics. What stands out is the exceptional performance of the Greens, who obtained 15 % of the vote from the Swiss abroad, almost doubling their national total. Without the votes of the Swiss abroad, the Greens' national share of the vote would have stood at 8.2 % instead of 8.4 %. While this does not represent a vast difference, it nevertheless il-

lustrates that the Swiss abroad who vote clearly have an impact.

The Greens surpassed the two traditional parties, the FDP. The Liberals and the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP). However, it was the Social Democratic Party (SP) that won the most votes from the Swiss abroad. With a 21 % share of the vote, it only just exceeded its national share of the vote, but this was nevertheless sufficient for first place owing to the amazingly poor performance of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) among the Swiss electorate abroad (20 %).

The electoral profile of the Swiss abroad is clearly lopsided: the red-green camp is overrepresented, while the national conservatives are underrepresented. The comparatively poor performance of the centre parties, the CVP and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), which are well established in rural areas, is also very noticeable. This suggests a rather left-liberal pro-

file for the Swiss abroad who actively participate in political life in Switzerland.

Swiss abroad less conservative

What does this mean exactly? The best way to understand the political profile of the Swiss abroad in context is to use a comparison. If one takes all Switzerland's communes as a point of reference, it is the town of Baden that most closely resembles their political profile. The community of Swiss abroad dispersed around the world who actively participate in politics is typically reflected in the population of Baden. The political profile in both cases reveals a rather urbane, well educated population stratum with an open outlook. Just like Baden's electorate, the Swiss abroad are not too far away from the Swiss middle ground. The major cities in German-speaking Switzerland and many of the communes in the French-speaking region have a profile that is much further to the left than that of the Swiss abroad.

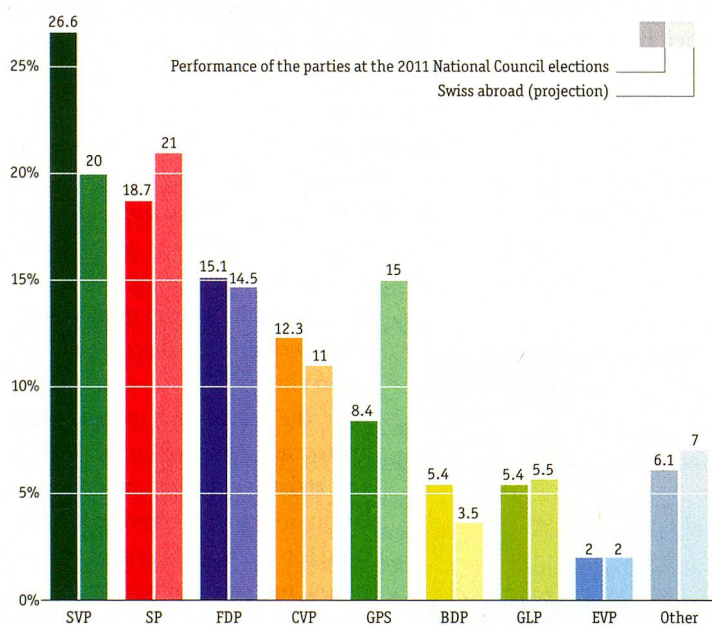


Fig. 1: Performance of the parties at the 2011 National Council elections. Official results and projection of the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad (error margin: +/-2 percentage points)

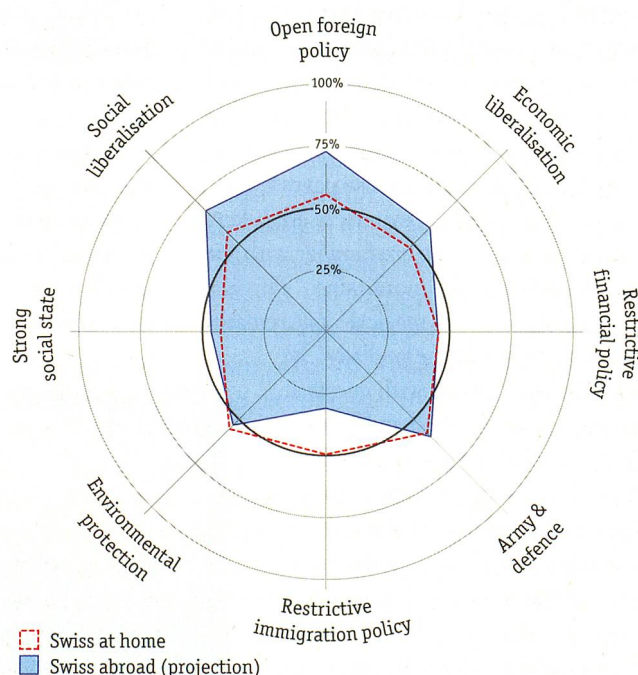


Fig. 2: A comparison of the political profile of the Swiss abroad and at home. Basis: 42 federal referenda from 2004 to 2011. Projection of the figures for the Swiss abroad (error margin: +/-3 percentage points)

Even better almost than election results are referenda for determining the political profile in Switzerland. Specific attitudes to key issues only become apparent at referenda. In the same way as with the electoral projection, we have used the disclosed cantonal referendum results to provide a projection for the entire politically active Swiss community abroad and thus reveal the political profile of the Swiss abroad (see fig. 2). This profile is based on 42 referenda between 2004 and 2012 and shows the issues and controversies where the position of the electorate abroad differs from that of the electorate at home.

All in all, the greatest divide between the Swiss at home and abroad appears in referenda on immigration policy. These include issues such as the SVP's extradition initiative and the bill on facilitating naturalisation. On average, support from the Swiss abroad for a "restrictive immigration policy" is 19 percentage points lower than that from the overall electorate. The difference in attitude is almost as great on foreign policy proposals, such as the Schengen agreement and biometric passports. Bills aimed at open foreign policy receive just short of 18 percentage points more support from the Swiss abroad than from all voters in general. But it is not just the differences that are of interest, the

similarities are too. The profile of the Swiss at home and abroad is practically identical in the areas of social, financial, security and, finally also, environmental policy. Given the strong backing that the Green Party enjoys among the Swiss abroad, their restraint when it comes to environmental policy is particularly interesting to note.

Neither left nor right

In overall terms, it is clear that the Swiss abroad support the red-green faction more and the SVP less than the population on average, but they cannot be deemed "left-wing" in the true sense. In the area of tension between labour and capital and the conflict of interests between employers and employees, the Swiss abroad do not diverge from the conservative consensus of the Swiss at home. There is only a difference on issues of economic policy. As the political profile shows, the Swiss abroad are more in favour of liberalisation and deregulation than the average person.

Generally speaking, the Swiss abroad lean neither to the left nor to the right on the traditional socioeconomic left-right axis. The distinctive characteristics of the profile of the Swiss abroad emerge in political debates along the so-called modernisation axis. On average, the Swiss abroad are more supportive of poli-

cies of openness and reform and therefore less conservative than their counterparts at home. This in itself is not particularly surprising given that the most significant common characteristic of this population group is their decision to emigrate. A degree of cosmopolitanism is therefore inherent in them. However, the decisive factor seems to be the social profile and educational background of the Swiss abroad. As the major survey of the Swiss abroad conducted in 2003 showed, they include a disproportionately high number of well educated people in managerial positions, at least among those registered on the electoral roll. If a group with the same educational and social structure was randomly put together from among the Swiss living at home, their political profile would not differ greatly from that of the Swiss abroad.

Attempts are sometimes made to explain the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad at referenda by their interests (for example, would they vote for an increase in VAT because they would not be affected by it?). However, it is actually the selective composition of this population group that is much more significant. In other words, it is the many well educated, ambitious and cosmopolitan emigrants who typify the community of the Swiss abroad politically.

MICHAEL HERMANN

SWISS ABROAD AND THEIR CANTONS:

The political profile of the Swiss abroad reflects the profile of their canton of origin, at least to a certain extent. However, the differences between the Swiss abroad from the various cantons are less prominent than those between the cantons themselves. This is shown by the political map with the five cantons that have revealed the voting behaviour of the Swiss abroad since the start of the survey period in 2004 (see fig. 3 to the right). At least in the case of these five, the variance between the cantons is greater than that between their Swiss citizens abroad.

The registered Swiss abroad are much more receptive to modernisation and a policy of openness than the local cantonal population in all five cantons.

However, the canton of Geneva stands out. Its population of Swiss abroad differs far less from the local population than in the other cantons. The obvious explanation would seem to be the overheated property market and Geneva's location near to the border, as a result of which many citizens of Geneva live on the other side of the border. This makes them Swiss abroad though they are still in effect part of the local population.

Interestingly, no such pattern emerges in Basel-Stadt despite the fact that the half-canton is also situated on the border of the country. However, the property market here is not overheated like it is in Geneva. Emigration to neighbouring countries therefore plays a less significant role in the make-up of the political profile.

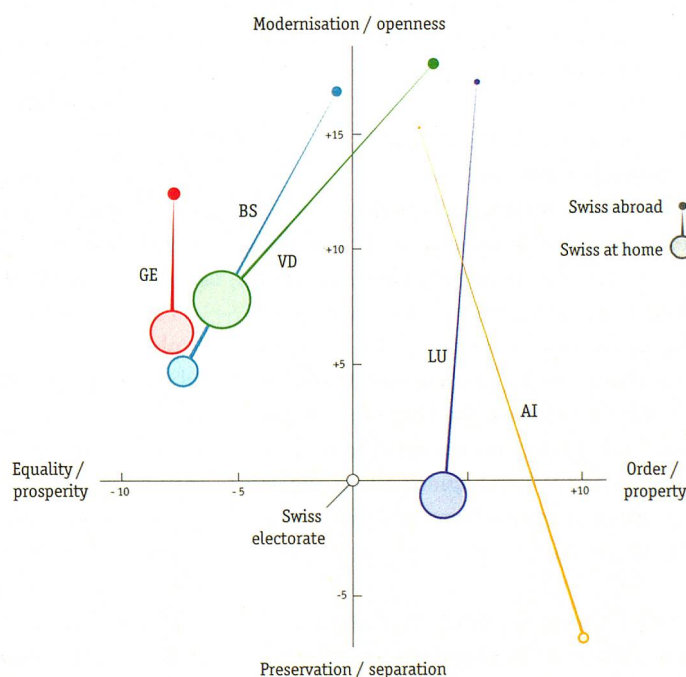


Fig. 3: Political map of the five cantons that have revealed the results for the Swiss abroad for many years. Basis: 42 federal referenda from 2004 to 2011