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The elections, money and (media) democracy

GEORG KOHLER

Anyone who contemplates the notion of “politics” must consider whether this entails fundamental questions, specific strategies or the activities involved in the daily business of politics. Political science in the English-speaking world has specific terms for these three areas. It uses *polity* to denote the first, *policy* for the second and *politics* when dealing with the third category.

The relationship between money (= power) and democratic voting behaviour is of interest from all three perspectives.

■ Should the monetary flows between benefactors and political parties be made transparent? – This is an issue relating to the fundamental principles, or *polity*.

■ If you wish to consider the way in which a position is promoted then this becomes a matter of *policy* analysis.

■ Or is the question of how (private) financial backers and parliamentarians cooperate of interest in light of controversial regulatory activities? This moves into the domain of *politics*.

The observation of murky power battles in the labyrinth of political and personal entanglements features heavily in the movie world. It is, of course, assumed that such machinations only ever occur in English, French or Italian. I cannot recall a recent production in dialect about “bought politicians”.

Rumours certainly circulate here in Switzerland too about certain decisions or u-turns that are perhaps explained by “mercurial constellations”, to use high-flown language. However, without proof such allegations are suicidal.

Let us move on then to the field of *polity* and legislation. It is, according to a communiqué issued by the Federal Council last November, a Swiss trait *not* to have a legal system requiring transparency over the funding of political parties. This would be incompatible with the “particular characteristics of the Swiss system”. Generally speaking, “the public perceive political life and the funding of the parties” as largely “a private commitment rather than a state matter”.

The statement was in response to a reproach from the Council of Europe’s *Group of States against Corruption* (GRECO), which had identified the lax relationship be-



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tween money and political power in Switzerland.

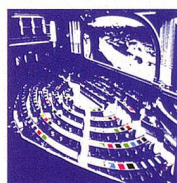
You do not have to be ill-disposed towards it to find the Federal Council’s answer unconvincing. Firstly, even in Switzerland’s case it is evident that superior financial resources make a difference. The weaker the ties to the traditional party milieu and the more fluid the views of people responding to well-orchestrated mood campaigns have become, the more important is an attention economy run on a national scale. But this does not come cheap, it requires money. Money which, in Switzerland like elsewhere, some people have a lot more of than others.

Secondly, the battle to sway the opinion of a politically mobilisable public has become a perpetual one in Switzerland too. Successfully influencing it requires a well-oiled, permanent and professionally run campaign apparatus. So, the issue raised by the Council of Europe over ensuring transparency seems far from superfluous.

Opinion management is aimed at approval and compliance. A *policy* on this which does not focus more heavily on emotions than rationality will no longer secure majority support in today’s sensationalist media environment. The mood is more important than arguments and reflection. Anyone unable to convey their arguments in a simplistic and emotionally charged way will never be perceived clearly enough to secure victory in modern-day society.

It would not be quite so bad if the form of narrative with the greatest impact was not that of differentiating between friend and enemy. Conceiving politics in this way means squeezing it into a paradigm of direct opposites and thus transforming it into a state that destroys the long-held Swiss virtues of seeking compromise and a willingness to integrate.

It is to be hoped that the relationship between money able to determine policy and the new Swiss media democracy, which the Federal Council regards as a secondary concern, does not undermine precisely what we and it are very proud of – “the particular characteristics of the Swiss system”.



ELECTIONS
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