

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 46 (2019)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Switzerland has been hit by a green wave
Autor: Lettau, Marc
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907182>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

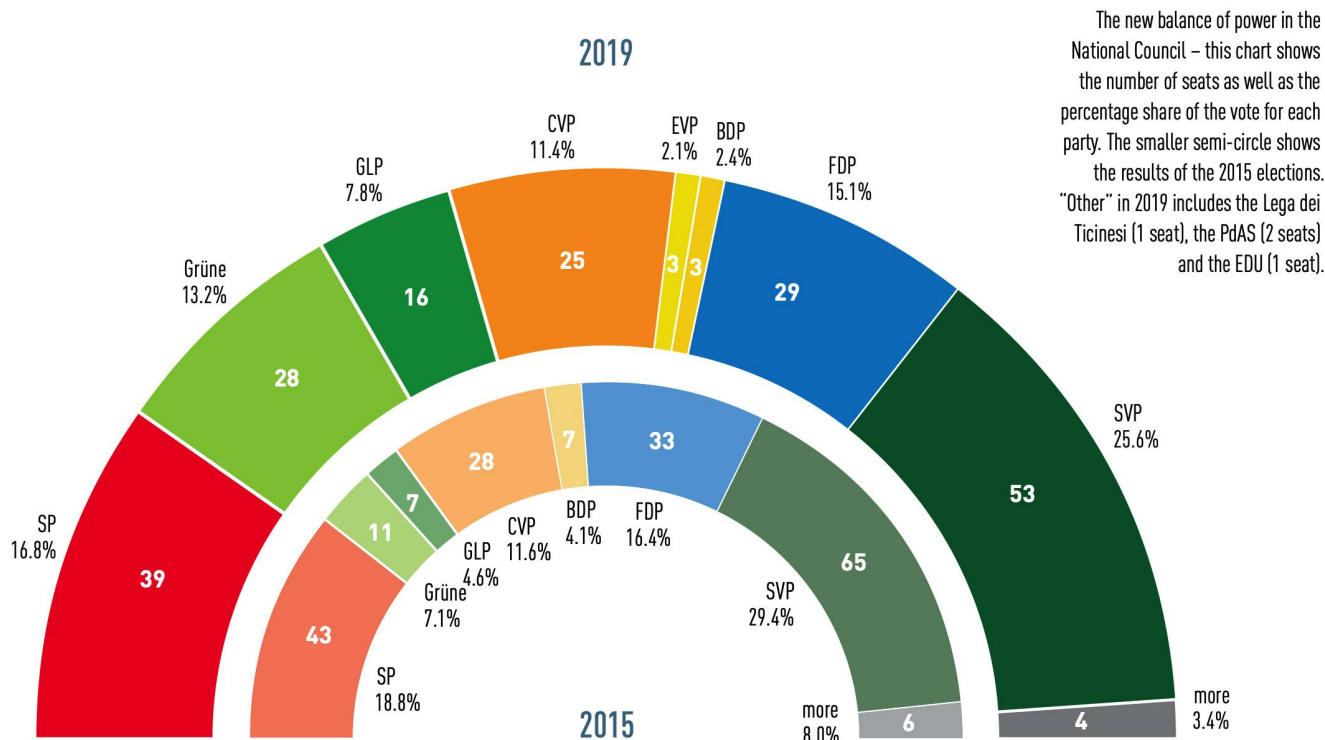
L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 16.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>



Switzerland has been hit by a green wave

The green parties made unprecedented gains in the national elections. The new parliament will comprise far more women, and its make-up will be slightly younger and more left-leaning. Overall, the shift is dramatic. Voters from the “Fifth Switzerland” helped to drive this result.



MARC LETTAU

Stability and balance are such strong influences in Swiss political life that national elections rarely produce tectonic shifts. Yet political experts have had to resort to employing superlatives in the aftermath of the 2019 elections, as they unanimously cite a change of “historic proportions”.

What happened? Essentially, the electorate opted for environmental parties in greater numbers than ever before. The Swiss Green Party (the Greens) gained 17 seats in the National Council and now has 28 National Councillors. No party has made such a leap forward since 1919, with the Greens now one of the four strongest parties in terms of voting share (Percentage share of the votes: see diagram).

This result is notable for how consistent it is across the country, regardless of the linguistic divide. The Greens even made strong gains in Ticino. They also outdid the opinion polls by a considerable margin. National Councillor and Green fraction leader Balthasar Glättli (canton of Zurich) reacted to the spectacular result almost in disbelief: “I never expected this in my wildest dreams.” The gains of the centrist Green Liberal Party (the Green Liberals), who ended up with more than twice as many seats as previously, made

for a green win-win. With a combined total of 44 seats in the National Council, the Greens and the Green Liberals now wield considerable clout on environmental issues. The ongoing climate debate was certainly a driving factor behind the power shift. Forget elections to the National Council and the Council of States – “climate elections” was instead the term on everyone’s lips.

Parliament is now greener than the results would suggest

Indeed, the success of the two green parties at the ballot box is only part of the story, because the “green wave” had already begun rolling in before the elections. The writing was on the wall from the outset. Take the Liberals (FDP), whose stance on a number of important environmental issues suddenly turned greener towards the end of the election campaign. For example, they announced in autumn that they were in favour of introducing an environmental tax on plane tickets, whereas previously they had tried to scupper this green levy. The party lost four National Council seats, yet the outcome might have been worse without

this about-turn. A poor showing from the Swiss People's Party (SVP), which railed consistently against "climate hysteria", shows what could have happened. The SVP lost as many as twelve seats but remains Switzerland's strongest political party. These losses are not only due to the SVP's attempt to ride out the climate debate, but are also down to the party's key messages on migration and the EU falling on much less receptive ears than four years ago.

Parliament has shifted only slightly to the left

All four parties in government – SVP, FDP, CVP and SP – were punished at the ballot box. The SP, which sees itself as green by nature, was hit hard, evidently losing votes to parties that are green by name. Although the Greens more than offset the SP's losses with their emphatically left-wing social policies, the upsurge of the Green Liberals means that the new parliament will primarily be much greener but not considerably more left-leaning.

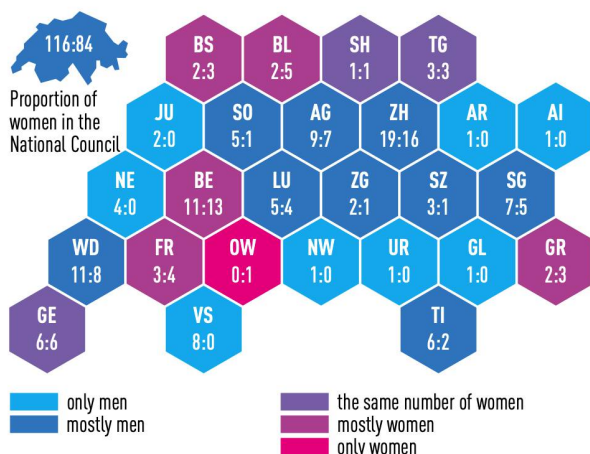
This could have a liberating effect on political discourse in Berne, as the bloc mentality of left and right wing loses significance. The combined green parties will constitute a third pole on environmental issues, while the centrist CVP, still a strong force despite election losses, will focus increasingly on striking compromises with the various power bases.

Many more women in parliament

Besides climate issues, the national women's strike in June also had an impact on the election results. The proportion of women in the National Council has risen from 32 to 42 per cent – a sizeable contingent even by international standards. Never has the number of elected females increased as much since the introduction of women's suffrage in 1971 – a result not even the initiators of the Helve-

Proportion of women in the National Council

Male-to-female ratio



Green trend includes the Council of States

At the time of going to press, the make-up of the Council of States was still undetermined. There will be a second round of voting in 14 cantons. Nevertheless, the elections to the small chamber can also be viewed as a clear success for the Green Party, regardless of the deciding ballot. Having already captured two seats courtesy of new face Céline Vara in Neuchâtel and Mathias Zopfi in Glarus, the party is well placed to win the run-off in at least four cantons (Berne, Basel-Landschaft, Geneva, Vaud). In particular, newcomer Mathias Zopfi caused a stir in the traditionally conservative canton of Glarus by winning his seat at the expense of the established SVP, which now has no representatives in Glarus.

(MUL)



Mathias Zopfi
Glarus sensation – Green newcomer Zopfi ousted the SVP's Werner Hösli from the Council of States.

tia is calling! women's movement dared hope was possible (see page 8).

Parliament is slightly more youthful

Not only has Berne become decidedly greener, notably more feminine and a little bit more left-wing, but the average age in parliament has also fallen. Many of the newly elected MPs are relatively young. This is partly down to first-time voters, who in post-election surveys expressed scant regard for what some of the more established National Councillors may have accomplished in the past. A total of 30 MPs of every political persuasion consequently lost their seats. These include prominent trade unionists such as Corrado Pardini (SP, canton of Berne) as well as the two linchpins of the Swiss Chamber of Commerce, Jean-François Rime (SVP, canton of Fribourg) and Hans-Ulrich Bigler (FDP, canton of Zurich).



Regula Rytz
The Bernese National Councillor brought home a double victory – one for the Greens and one for women.

The Swiss Abroad doubled down

It would be fair to say that voters in the "Fifth Switzerland" amplified the major trends in this election. Initial surveys showed they were particularly keen on the colour green. A quarter of all votes from abroad (25.2 %) went to the Green Party, who consequently overtook former front runners, the SP (17.1 %), as well as the SVP (17.8 %) to become the strongest party in the "Fifth Switzerland".

Incidentally, with e-voting unavailable, voter turnout among Swiss living abroad plummeted. In cantons that offered e-voting for the 2015 elections, the participation rate among Swiss Abroad fell by up to a third. Voting dropped from 31.8 to 21.4 % in the canton of Geneva, from 32.1 to 23.4 % in Lucerne, from 26.0 to 19.2 % in Basel-Stadt, from 29.7 to 24.9 % in Neuchâtel, and from 28.5 to 22.6 % in Thurgau. These figures are bound to reignite the debate on e-voting.



Corrado Pardini
A generational shift claimed 30 casualties across the political spectrum, including trade unionist Pardini (SP, canton of Berne).

“Swiss democracy is improving in quality”

At 42 per cent, the National Council now contains more women than ever before. The Helvetia is calling! cross-party campaign masterminded by Switzerland's women's associations played a significant role in this regard. Project manager Jessica Zuber explains why the election results are historic.

The National Council – the large chamber – comprises 200 members, of which 84 are now female. The proportion of women has risen from 32 to 42 per cent. Female representation in the Council of States – the small chamber – will be a lot lower. But, as Jessica Zuber says, “It is an historic election for women.” Zuber, a political scientist, headed the Helvetia is calling! campaign by Alliance F, the umbrella organisation of Swiss women's associations. She notes that Swiss women, who only gained the right to vote in

1971, have increased their parliamentary presence in baby steps over the past decades. “The increments were always three to four percentage points,” she says. Voters have now elected almost a quarter more women to parliament – a record for left-wing and conservative camps alike. “Swiss democracy is improving in quality, because men and women are now more equally represented,” Zuber adds. It is fair to say that this result had been anticipated. Never before have so many women stood for election. Women

“These were the climate elections”

Apart from the scientific facts, the election success of the green parties should be motivation for Switzerland to pursue more ambitious climate targets. This is the view of Swiss climatologist Sonia Seneviratne, who has some recommended reading for the newly elected parliament.

Sonia Seneviratne believes that the tremendous increase in seats and voting share achieved by the green parties is due to the Swiss people realising that something urgently needs to be done about climate change. “These were definitely the climate elections,” she says. Seneviratne hails from the canton of Vaud and is currently Professor for Land-Climate Dynamics at ETH Zurich. She is also a lead author of reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that warn about the severe consequences



“The SP needs a return to pro-European values”

We now need fresh impetus to break the impasse over Europe, says Thomas Cottier, chairman of the Switzerland in Europe association, who views the election results as a hint to the Social Democratic Party (SP) that it should stop trying to obstruct progress on a framework deal with the EU.

It is hard to tell at this early stage what impact the elections will have on Swiss EU policy, as not all parties in the election campaign were clear on whether Switzerland should sign the framework agreement with the EU that has been on the table for months. This is due to sticky issues such as wage protection. “The clock is ticking,” says Thomas Cottier, Professor Emeritus of European and International Economic Law at the University of Berne and chairman of the pro-EU Switzerland in Europe association. Cottier recommends that the Federal Council and the newly

elected parliament “take their cue from voters”, who handed a rebuke to Switzerland's most EU-sceptic party, the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Not only is the SVP against the framework agreement, it also wants to put an end to freedom of movement through its limitation initiative. “But this policy of obstruction was rejected at the ballot box,” says Cottier, explaining that the Green Liberals (GLP), a party emphatically in favour of the framework agreement, emerged stronger from the elections. “The seat gains for the GLP can be viewed as an endorsement of this stance,” he says. Cottier inter-



also stood a better chance of being elected from their lists than in 2015. Helvetia is calling! was actively involved in around a thousand local party sections across the country, motivating and supporting hundreds of female candidates on the campaign trail. Helvetia called – and was heard. Now was clearly the right time. Zuber believes that several factors prove this, not least the women's strike in June that attracted hundreds of thousands of people. Furthermore, an overwhelming majority in parliament

chose to elect two women to the Federal Council one year ago. Regardless of party differences, greater female representation could also have a tangible impact on the political agenda, says Zuber. Examples include policies to promote work-family balance, combat gun violence and tackle environmental issues. Zuber stresses that the Helvetia is calling! campaign will continue beyond the elections: "Our aim is equal gender representation in both chambers." (SWE)

of global warming. The Federal Council recently tightened the country's climate targets on the basis of these findings, announcing that Switzerland must aim for climate neutrality and reduce net greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050. Before the elections, the Council of States approved a revised CO₂ Act that proposes a surcharge on the price of petrol as well as a levy on air tickets. We will soon see what a greener National Council thinks about this, and whether voters are prepared to swallow the new

taxes. "There is a good chance that Swiss climate policy will become more ambitious," says Seneviratne, who thinks the Federal Council's targets are realistic, not radical. Switzerland, a highly developed country, has committed in the Paris Agreement to do its bit against climate change, and green taxes are a socially acceptable means of going about it, she explains. "And you can refund these contributions by reducing health insurance premiums, for example." In particular, the climatologist recommends

that members of the newly elected parliament read the IPCC special report on global warming, which details the climate risks of exceeding the 1.5°C threshold. "I would even suggest that we begin discussing whether we want to make Switzerland carbon-neutral by as early as 2040," she adds. (SWE)



interprets the losses for the SP as a sign that people want the left-wing party to return to its traditional pro-European values. For example, prominent trade unionists who had recently expressed their opposition to the framework deal lost their seats. If the SP grabbed the bull by the horns and took the lead, he believes that a big "coalition of common sense" could come together in the same way that it did to oppose the SVP's limitation initiative. This is the only way to preserve and develop the bilateral agreements, which are important for the economy and the country as a whole,



says Cottier: "Swiss who live in EU countries also need legal certainty." The Europe expert wants the Federal Council and parliament to take other things into account besides domestic considerations. "The geopolitical climate has changed," he says. In the coming years, Switzerland will become much more dependent on stable relations with the EU, he believes. (SWE)