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What became of the environmental and women's vote in Switzerland

Parliamentary elections take place in Switzerland on 23 October. The last federal elections, in 2019, saw a green wave and shift to the left. At the same time, more women than ever were elected. What impact has all this had? We took stock with political scientist Michael Hermann at the onset of the 2023 election year.

INTERVIEW: SUSANNE WENGER

Swiss Review: Michael Hermann, the left-leaning Green Party made gains in the 2019 Swiss parliamentary elections, and the Green Liberals gained ground as well. Two years later, the people rejected the CO₂ Law, which was supposed to be a step forward in environmental politics. What happened here?

Michael Hermann: It's contradictory. First of all, there was a large green wave in voting, a historic shift in the balance of power in Switzerland. Then, under 50 per cent of people voted in favour of a CO₂ law that was not even particularly strict. Various factors led to the green wave having a smaller impact on policy than one might have thought. On the one hand, the climate and the environment are right at the top of the list of sources of concern for the population. On the other hand, as the law would have resulted in petrol and flying becoming more expensive, many people felt more attached to their wallet than to working together to save the environment. Another fact is that even in 2019, only a minority voted green.

The green parties nonetheless won 21 percent of votes between them. The Green Party won more additional seats in the National Council than any party had ever done before.

Yes, the Greens were outstanding in the way they mobilised. They were visible and active. However, to make an actual change to climate policy, you need to form broad alliances in the Swiss parliament, which is largely conservative. These alliances have only come about under the impetus

of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had ramifications for the Swiss energy supply. All of a sudden, people were talking less about the global climate and more about keeping warm in winter and having enough power to run their homes and their businesses. This accelerated the energy transition in record time, whereas the political mills in Switzerland grind slowly.



You are referring to the solar offensive including funding for hydroelectric power that was approved by the Swiss parliament in autumn 2022 and came into effect straight afterwards. Photovoltaics was long considered an alternative green fad in Switzerland, a soft technology. Now, solar energy is seen as a potential solution for making the country more energy-independent. It has become the vision for how Switzerland wants to shape the future of its energy sector. An alliance formed that included The

Greens and the centre-right, and previously sceptical homeowners became fans of photovoltaic power. The reality of the Ukraine war has thus almost set more in motion than the green wave at the 2019 elections.

Your institute compiles election barometers on behalf of Swiss radio and television. One year before the 2023 elections, you observed that the green wave was losing momentum.

The Greens are having a hard time getting their message across. Their central theme of the climate and environment has become even more important since 2019, especially in the wake of the 2022 heatwave in Switzerland. However, the theme is no longer associated exclusively with the Greens, and the focus has shifted. Now, even power station people and the industrial sector are talking about renewable energies. It is more about securing Switzerland's energy supply than about what the Greens are seeking: a resource-friendly lifestyle. The 2019 elections took place after a period of economic prosperity; now we are in the midst of a crisis. Themes that are seen as idealistic, such as those promoted by the Greens, are getting less traction.

In 2019, more women were elected to parliament than at any point since women were granted the right to vote in 1971. The percentage of women in the larger parliamentary chamber, the National Council, rose to above 40 percent. Has this also affected the policies being implemented?

Yes, it has. The female vote in 2019 was also aimed to an extent at fighting the political stereotype of the



conservative alpha male, who has dominated Swiss politics for a long time, on both the right and the left. The parliament has now become more open and more progressive, which is being reflected in social developments. One illustration of this is the decisions being taken on child-care outside the family. This topic is now taken seriously, whereas in the past Switzerland had traditionally clung to conservative role models. Even marriage for all was adopted during this legislature, another sign of greater social openness.

2022 saw new gender gaps opening. In the referendum on a higher retirement age for women, men outvoted women by an unusually large margin.

The reform of the old-age and survivors' insurance (OASI) had a direct effect on women's old-age pensions and career prospects. Bills with such direct consequences for one gender only are a rare occurrence. In that respect, the OASI vote does not alter the general picture. It did, however, bring one fact sharply back into the spotlight: gender politics is about more than just lifestyle. It is about a traditional welfare policy and financial protection. This was a message to the SP in particular.



“The reality of the Ukraine war has almost set more in motion than the green wave at the 2019 elections.”

Michael Hermann

The Social Democratic Party rejected the OASI reform – one of the main legislative projects of the government – and lost by an unexpectedly small margin to the united conservative camp.

The OASI vote showed that social security issues, particularly from a female perspective, can mobilise people who do not belong to the SP camp itself. At the same time, certain party circles tend to highlight cultural war themes in identity politics, which can frighten off potential voters. In times of crisis like these, parties benefit from issues on which they are traditionally seen as competent. For the SP, this means welfare politics, and for the FDP it means economic issues.

In 2019, all parties represented in the federal government lost a greater or lesser percentage of the vote and number of seats in parliament: the SP, the FDP, The Centre and – by easily the biggest margin – the large, conservative right-wing SVP. Could the SVP recapture lost ground?

Not really. It did remain the most voted for party in Switzerland. During the Covid pandemic, it took a stance against the protective measures taken and thus found itself aligned with Covid-sceptic movements. However, this frightened people away, in the same way as the pro-Putin stances adopted by SVP exponents on the war in Ukraine. In addition, the Liberal competition returned to a more conservative and right-wing position under their new

party chairman, Thierry Burkart, in 2021. What the SVP is looking for is an important topic.

Are right-wing conservatives lacking an issue that people can get passionate about?

Up to the 2015 elections, the SVP had primarily focused on highlighting the issues of Europe and migration. This gave it an advantage over the other parties for several years. This has



Biography:

Michael Hermann was born in Berne and is the owner and head of the Sotomo Research Institute in Zurich. The author and doctor of social geography has been analysing Swiss politics and society for many years.

Photos: Frank Bröderli

changed. The federal government has been so restrained in its policies on Europe that the SVP has no ammunition to use against it. Migration and immigration are now seen as less of a concern, especially with the lack of skilled personnel in Switzerland. If, however, the focus returns to the topic of foreign nationals over the next few months, the SVP will be able to mobilise more effectively than it did in 2019.

Why has no progress been made in European politics since the last elections? How stable are the political balances of power in Switzerland at a time of crisis? You can read the rest of the interview with Michael Hermann in the online edition: revue.link/hermann