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Switzerland shifts to the right

The right-wing SVP focused on immigration to win the national elections as the green wave ebbed. The SP and the Centre also benefited from voter concern – over soaring healthcare costs.

THEODORA PETER

For the Swiss Greens and Green Liberals, 22 October 2023 was a day to forget. Four years after their unprecedented triumph at the ballot box, the environmental parties suffered losses in the National Council. The Greens dropped below the symbolic 10 per cent mark – from a record 13.5 percent to a 9.8 percent share of the vote. The party was still able to defend two thirds of the National Council seats that it won in 2019 – a small consolation. Nevertheless, the Greens were undoubtedly the losers of the election. The same applies to the Green Liberals (GLP), who also relinquished a third of their seats with a voting share of 7.6 percent.

But the October sun shone on the SVP. The right-wing Swiss People's Party increased its share of the vote from 25.6 to 27.9 percent, having been the big loser in the "climate elections" of 2019. Four years on and it has regained three quarters of its National Council losses of 2019 in one fell swoop. Minds go back to 2015, when the SVP celebrated its biggest-ever election victory with nearly 30 percent of the vote. Given the uncertain geopolitical situation and the rising influx of refugees, the party was able to campaign successfully on its anti-immigration platform. In the run-up to the elections, it launched a "sustainability initiative" aimed at limiting Switzerland's population to 10 million.

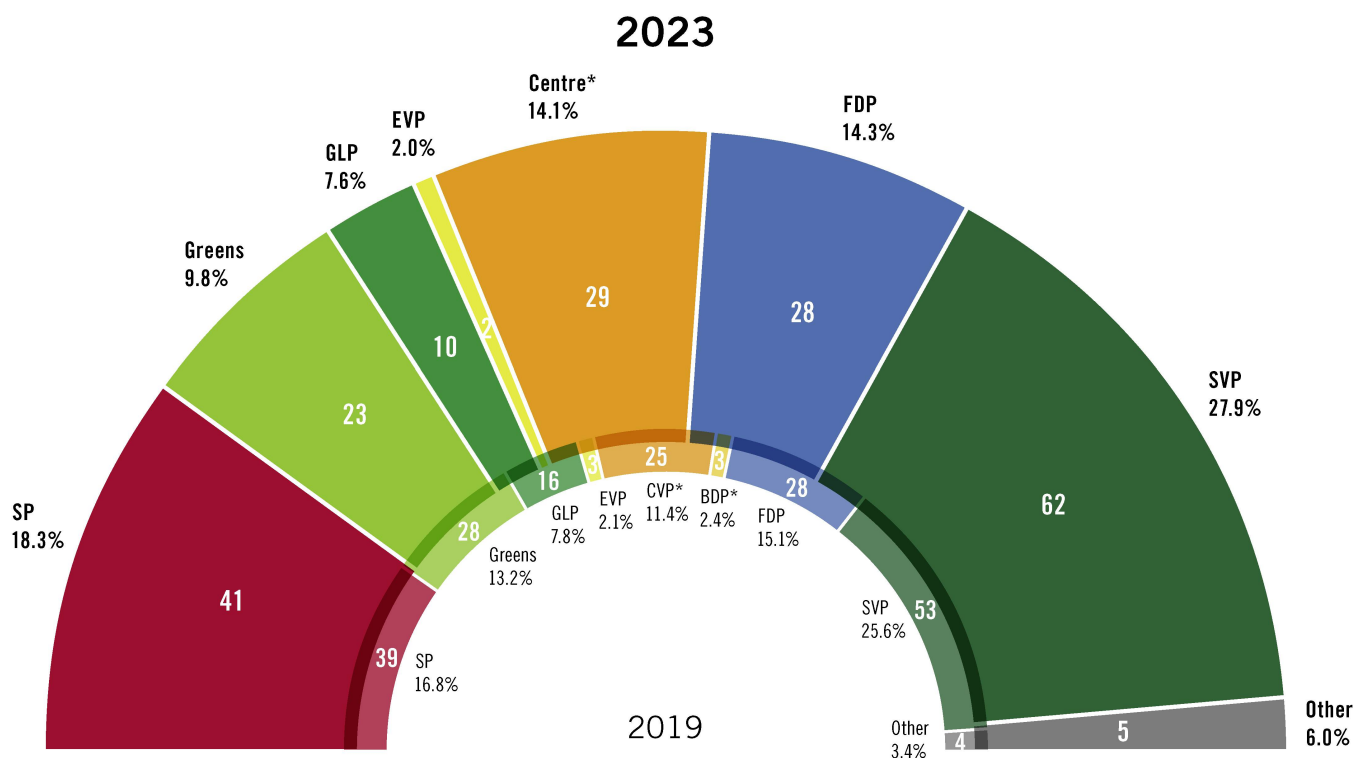
The SP remained the second-strongest party with an 18.3 percent share of the vote – a 1.5 percent increase that reversed most of its previous election losses. But this did not offset the collapse of the Greens. Overall, the 2023 elections have weakened the left-green camp. In the forthcoming legislative period, the left-wing parties will have to rely even more on referendums and popular initiatives to push through their policies at the ballot box. As was previously the case, the SP and the Greens will have to make alliances in parliament – particularly with the Centre.

The Centre – in the kingmaker role

Founded in 2021 following the merger of the CVP and BDP, the Centre skilfully sold itself during the election campaign as the main centrist alternative to the Left and the Right. It will continue to play the kingmaker role in forging parliamentary majorities. Under its new name, the party improved slightly with a voting share of 14.1 percent – almost catching up with the FDP on 14.3 percent. With a loss of 0.8 percent, the FDP election performance was as underwhelming as it was four years ago. This gradual decline is hard to digest for the once proud FDP, one of the founding parties of the Swiss federal state.

While the Swiss Evangelical People's Party (EVP) suffered losses, other small parties gained ground. These in-





The new balance of power in the National Council – this chart shows the number of seats as well as the percentage share of the vote for each party. The smaller semi-circle shows the results of the 2019 elections. “Other” now consists of the EDU (2 seats), the Geneva Citizens’ Movement (2 seats) and the Ticino League (1 seat).

*The Centre was created following a merger between the CVP and the BDP, which ran separately in 2019.

clude the Geneva Citizens’ Movement (MCG) and the Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland (EDU), both of which belong to the right-wing camp. However, critics of Covid restrictions running on the “Aufrecht” and “Mass-Voll” tickets missed out on the National Council by a clear distance.

The SVP attracted new voters

Why has parliament shifted to the right? According to a post-election survey by the Sotomo research institute, 26 percent of voters said that immigration was a decisive factor in how they voted. The SVP has always been able to mobilise the electorate by focusing on immigration, says political scientist Sarah Bütikofer. “But in this election campaign they were able to gain new voters beyond their traditional support base – and across the party political spectrum.”

Besides immigration, healthcare costs also influenced voting choice. The rise in health insurance premiums was a key issue for 25 percent, with dissatisfaction with how the issue was being tackled accounting for a third of voter defections. “However, no single party is able to set the agenda here in the way that the SVP has made the issue of immigration its own,” said Bütikofer in an interview with Radio SRF. The parties able to translate concern over soar-

ing premiums most effectively into votes were the Centre and the SP. Both have submitted their own initiatives to counter rising health costs. These will be put to voters in 2024.

Climate policy no longer a green monopoly

Astonishingly, 23 percent cited climate change as an important issue in the post-election survey despite the Greens losing. Why the discrepancy? There is no comparison between the current situation and how things were four years ago, says Bütikofer. “There was a progressive mood in the air in 2019. Climate change was the hot topic, prompting many people to vote for a party with the word

Female representation in the National Council has fallen from a record 42 percent to 38.5 percent – due to the resurgent, male-heavy SVP.

“green” in their name.” The world has completely changed since then. First the pandemic, then war, then the recent collapse of big bank Credit Suisse – “There was one crisis after another.” To compound this, the Greens no longer have exclusive rights to climate and environmental policy either. The Climate and Innovation Act was the result of a broad-based compromise supported by all parties except the SVP, she points out.

Distinctly greener and a little more to the left – how the fifth Switzerland voted

How to describe the voting preferences of the Swiss Abroad in the October 2023 elections? Distinctly greener, slightly more left-wing, and a bit more liberal-friendly compared to the domestic electorate. The SP secured the biggest share of the expatriate vote on 20.4% (compared to 18.3% in the overall result), followed by the SVP – the most popular of the centre-right and right-wing parties in the “Fifth Switzerland” – on 18.5% (overall: 27.9%). Hot on the SVP’s heels were the Greens on 18.4% (overall: 9.8%). The FDP ended on 13.6% (overall: 14.3%), while the Green Liberals bettered their domestic result, attracting 11.4% of the expatriate vote (overall: 7.6%). The Centre, meanwhile, accounted for a modest 7.7% (overall: 14.1%).

Compared to the 2019 elections, the “Fifth Switzerland” also shifted a little to the right but not as much as Switzerland as a whole. The SP, the Greens and the Green Liberals secured just over 50% of the vote combined, as opposed to nearly 53% four years ago.

No luck for the election candidates from the “Fifth Switzerland”, who were mostly way down on the votes needed to claim a National Council seat. Some expatriate candidates who achieved respectable results in 2019 were crowded out this time by a flood of other candidates on myriad election lists.

Notably, voter turnout in the “Fifth Switzerland” was lower in many cantons than four years ago – but was significantly higher in Basel-Stadt, where expatriate voters were able to use the new e-voting system: 23.8% (2019: 19.2%). Turnout also increased slightly in St Gallen, another canton in which e-voting is being trialled.

MARC LETTAU

The 46 seats in the Council of States have not all been filled, with a second round of voting to decide 13 seats scheduled for mid-November – after the editorial deadline of this edition of “Swiss Review”. It was a neck-and-neck race between the FDP and the Centre in a smaller chamber that will continue to be conservative-dominated. In the last four years, the Council of States has repeatedly blocked decisions by the more progressive National Council – e.g. on increased funding for day-care centres. With the National Council shifting right, the two chambers are now a little less politically divergent.

Elections to the Federal Council in December

Switzerland’s newly elected parliament will convene at the start of December. To mark the beginning of the legislative period it will appoint the seven-member federal government, the Federal Council, for a new term on 13 December. Who from the SP will succeed their party’s outgoing Federal Councillor Alain Berset? As the second-strongest party, the Social Democrats have two Federal Council seats – which will remain uncontested by the other parties.

The 2023 elections saw a record number of candidates, with **5,909 people competing for 200 National Council seats**. There were 618 election lists – another new high.

According to an unwritten rule known as the “magic formula”, the three parties with the most votes are entitled to two seats each, and the fourth-strongest party to one seat. Based on this logic, the existing composition of the Federal Council – 2 SVP, 2 SP, 2 FDP, 1 Centre – continues to apply. The two serving FDP Federal Councillors – Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis and Finance Minister Karin Keller-Sutter – can expect to be re-elected in December. But with the Centre Party closing in on the FDP, questions surrounding the magic formula are likely to resurface sooner or later. The Greens will have to postpone their dream of joining the Federal Council for another four years – their chances of stepping into the breach are low.

Overview of results (Federal Statistical Office):
revue.link/elections2023

