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Transparent election campaign funding – an important first in Swiss democracy

This year's parliamentary elections saw parties, candidates and election committees having to publish details of budgets and major donations. A statutory duty of disclosure has been introduced to make political funding in Switzerland more transparent – but loopholes were already apparent.

SUSANNE WENGER

The Greens received a record donation of one million Swiss francs, most of which they used for their election campaign. The donor was Carmita Burkard, heir to the founding family of building materials group Sika. On the other side of the political spectrum, former Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher invested 550,000 francs in the SVP election campaign. There had long been speculation about Blocher being a party donor. This was the first-ever specific donation of his to be disclosed – courtesy of a new statutory provision that came into force in 2022 and debuted in this year's elections to the National Council and the Council of States.

How much money goes to which parties before every vote? How much do pressure groups give and to whom? Swiss voters could only make an educated guess until now, as there was no duty of disclosure at federal level. Such questions were all the more pertinent because state party funding in Switzerland is rudimentary at best, and parties very much rely on money from private sources instead. Since the 1970s, this lack of

transparency had attracted criticism not only in Switzerland but also from GRECO, the anti-corruption arm of the Council of Europe.

SVP and FDP with the biggest war chests

Yet parliament continued to reject calls for change – before changing its mind in 2021 in the face of a popular initiative by the SP and the Greens. Parties must now disclose their expenditure and name donors who contribute 15,000 francs or more. Funding for elections and popular votes must be disclosed to the public if it amounts to at least 50,000 francs. The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) is responsible for oversight. Parties must disclose details to the SFAO, which then publishes the data on its website.

None of the information disclosed before the elections was earth-shattering, but at least the facts were there in black and white. Take campaign spending. The FDP and SVP were the parties that spent the most on the 2023 election campaign. The SVP had 4.9 million francs at its dis-

posal at national level – the most money – followed by the FDP on 2.5 million. Factor in the budgets of the cantonal parties and candidates, and the FDP narrowly led the way on almost 13 million compared to almost 12 million for the SVP – although final accounts were not completed until after the elections.

Lack of transparency over benefactors

From 2024, the duty of disclosure will also apply to popular votes. Swiss democracy will become more transparent from the electorate's point of view. However, there are already ways in which the new guidelines can be creatively interpreted to circumvent the spirit (if not the letter) of the law. In some cases, benefactors have already started hiding behind privately run legal entities with names like "Verein für lösungsorientierte Politik". Consult the SFAO list to see who is behind this and similar funding vehicles, and you will find no more information.

But how much impact does money actually have on election results? If you have more funds, you can mobilise support and win more votes, write political scientists Rahel Freiburghaus and Adrian Vatter in Berne. On the other hand, voters ultimately have to trust parties on the issues that matter. The Greens have fallen out of favour despite receiving the biggest donation. And the candidate with the biggest individual budget, Zurich's Donato Scognamiglio from the EVP, missed out on a National Council seat despite a war chest of 365,000 francs.

The election posters are gone, but the transparent political funding is here to stay. From 2024, the funding disclosure rule will also apply to popular votes.

Photo: Keystone



Information on political funding (SFAO website): revue.link/fiko

