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Parliament opts for status quo in the Federal Council

The ‘magic formula’ for apportioning the seats on the Federal Council remains intact: the four biggest parties divide up the seven seats among themselves. However, unease is growing about the ‘power cartel’.

THEODORA PETER

The general elections to the Federal Council on 13 December 2023 were all about continuity. A parliamentary majority voted to preserve the balance of power. That means the Federal Council will, for the next four years, comprise two members each from the SVP, SP and FDP plus one member from the Centre (page 13).

The ‘magic formula’

The unwritten law known as the ‘magic formula’ stipulates a coalition government where the four main parties are represented according to their share of the vote. The election victory of the SVP and increased share of the vote for the SP cemented their claim to power. The two biggest parties won 27.9 per cent (SVP) and 18.3 per cent (SP) of the vote. However, the entitlement of the third-placed FDP to its two seats is rather more tenuous: it accounted for 14.3 per cent of the vote, a mere whisker ahead of the Centre party (14.1 per cent). This obviously raises the question as to why the FDP has two seats, while the Centre ‘only’ has one despite winning practically the same number of votes.

‘Respect for the institutions’

Nonetheless, the Centre party decided not to demand a second seat in December at the expense of the FDP. The reason given was out of ‘respect for the institutions’. They did not want to remove any serving federal councillors from office, as Centre President Gerhard Pfister had made clear at the outset. The FDP government members, Ignazio Cassis and Karin Keller-Sutter, stood for re-election. The SVP also argued in favour of stability during times of crisis –



and naturally was keen not to weaken the FDP as its ally in the right-of-centre camp.

Attempt by the Greens fails

However, the Greens as the fifth-placed party did go for one of the two FDP seats. “A government is stable and strong when it represents the maximum possible number of voters,”

A beaming smile from the new Federal Councillor: Beat Jans (SP) is replacing the departing Alain Berset on the Federal Council. In Jans, the canton of Basel-Stadt returns to the national government following a 50-year hiatus.
Photo Keystone

Smaller parties remain outside the Federal Council. A quarter of voters are not represented in the government.

argued faction leader Aline Trede. The Greens represent just under 10 per cent of voters. “That puts us closer arithmetically to one Federal Council seat than the FDP to two seats with its 14 per cent.” The smaller Green Liberals (GLP, 7.6 per cent) argued that the will of the voters was not adequately represented in the current constellation. “A quarter of the voters are not represented in the Federal Council,” pointed out GLP faction leader Corina Gredig. Therefore, they felt they had a case to challenge for the second FDP seat.

However, Green candidate Gerhard Andrey ultimately fell well short as both FDP government members kept their seats with a comfortable majority. This was also due to the SP not wanting to break with tradition: the ‘magic formula’. That

was because the left-wing party relied on the right-wing camp's support on 13 December to retain the seat of departing SP minister Alain Berset. This prompted the Greens to accuse them of selling out to the 'power cartel'.

The voting procedure also placed the social democrats in something of a dilemma. The vacant SP seat was the last item on the agenda – i.e. after the re-election of the six government members (the seventh one having opted not to stand). The SP was mindful that it could be penalised by the SVP and FDP if it threw its weight behind the Green candidate. The strategy worked as the parliament selected one of the two official SP candidates to succeed Alain Berset.

A new face on the Federal Council

The successful candidate was the almost 60-year-old president of Basel-Stadt cantonal government and former national councillor, Beat Jans. The SP member campaigned as a builder of bridges and promised to keep his door open when in office. Jans is Basel-Stadt's first federal councillor in over 50 years. Through

his election, the urban centres are once again prominent in the federal government. The departure of Alain Berset (Fribourg) also marks the end of French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino's majority in the Federal Council: four of the seven government members are once again from the

German-speaking areas, including Viola Amherd (Centre) from Valais, the federal president in 2024. The parliament also elected a new federal chancellor to act as chief of staff and coordinate government business. Walter Thurnherr of the Centre party has stepped down (see Review 6/2023 for profile) to be suc-

						
SP	SP	The centre	FDP	FDP	SVP	SVP
Elisabeth Baume-Schneider Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA)	Beat Jans Federal Department of Justice and Police (FDJP)	Viola Amherd Federal Depart- ment of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport (DDPS)	Karin Keller-Sutter Federal Department of Finance (FDF)	Ignazio Cassis Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)	Albert Rösti Fed. Dep. of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communica- tions (DETEC)	Guy Parmelin Fed. Dep. of Economic Affairs, Education and Research (EAER)

ceeded by his deputy, Viktor Rossi of the Green Liberals. This is the first time a member of a non-governing party has filled the hot seat. As head of the Federal Chancellery, Rossi will also be responsible for advancing the cause of e-voting. In a pre-election survey by the Organisation of

the Swiss Abroad, Rossi gave his assurance that he wanted to build on what has been achieved so far. Moreover, he also reiterated that "electronic voting is an important instrument to many Swiss Abroad for political codetermination". So, it was right that those voters who live abroad are made a priority.

A qualified slide to the right

The right-wing conservative Swiss People's Party (SVP) emerged as the resounding winner in the National Council following the federal elections of autumn 2023 (see "Swiss Review" 6/2023). However, in the Council of States, the second chamber, the SVP achieved a more modest result. Despite having been in a promising position, their candidates fell short in several cantons at the second vote, particularly in the canton of Zurich.

The FDP also performed well below its own expectations.

By contrast, the Centre built on its leading position in the Council of States. To the left, the SP consolidated its representation, while the Greens again lost ground. The Green Liberals (GLP) returned to the Council of States. The breakdown of the 46 seats in the Council of States is as follows – compared to the 2019 elections: Centre 15 seats (+2 seats), FDP 11 (-1), SP 9 (-), SVP 6 (-), Greens 3 (-2),



GLP 1 (+1), MCG 1 (+1). Overall, the Council of States will remain a bastion of conservatism. At the same time, the centre will have greater clout than hitherto. (TP)

Overview of all the election results to the National Council and Council of States:
www.wahlen.admin.ch/en/ch/