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Notes on Recent Elections

The parliamentary and executive elections in Switzerland, 2003

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The 2003 elections were among the most momentous in Switzerland's recent history. As the country is renowned for its political stability, the changes brought about by the elections constituted a minor revolution. The broad ten-year trend towards polarisation continued, with further gains for the right-wing and left-wing parties. Among them, those performing better were the 'newer' parties in the shape of the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC) – formerly a Protestant agrarian party, now a New Right party¹ – and the Greens (GPS/PES). The SVP/UDC emerged as the clear winner, becoming the largest party in parliament and increasing its representation in government. However, in terms of votes and seats, the SVP grew less between 1999 and 2003 than over the previous four years. The main losers were the centrist Christian-Democrats (CVP/PDC) and the centre-right Radicals (FDP/PRD) whose electorate was further eroded. Moreover, the CVP/PDC lost out significantly in the executive elections. Although the results were not dramatic in terms of the composition of Parliament, they had a fairly radical impact on the make up of the executive. The system has coped smoothly with these changes and is unlikely to undergo a sharp change of direction in the near future. But their long-term effects may significantly alter the way the Swiss political system works.

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¹ See Mazzoleni (2003) for an in-depth account of the party's transformation.

1. Background

Switzerland has a unique institutional set up among democracies.² It is a federal republic combining perfect bicameralism, semi-presidentialism, and the extensive use of direct democracy. The 200-seat lower house of parliament, the National Council, represents the Swiss people as a whole, while the 46-seat upper house, the Council of States, represents the cantons. As both are directly elected on a cantonal basis, the only real difference between them is that National Council seats are allocated to cantons in proportion to population size, whereas each canton has two seats in the Council of States regardless of its population.³

The electoral system for the lower house is an open list system of proportional representation that allows for an ample degree of preferential voting. Because many cantons are small, the average district magnitude is rather small, and the overall proportionality of the system is lower than in other political systems using PR. There is not a uniform electoral system for the Council of States as this is a matter of cantonal law, but all cantons bar one use a two-round majority system. Most cantons hold elections for the Council of States at the same time as the election for the National Council, but two cantons and one half-canton hold elections for the upper house some months earlier. Apart from those exceptions, federal parliamentary elections are held every four years on the third Sunday in October.

The seven-member collegial executive, the Federal Council, is elected in December following the federal election. Once elected, the Federal Council cannot be brought down by the parliament. The absence of the confidence link with parliament makes Switzerland an intermediate system between parliamentary and presidential systems. The seven federal councillors are elected in turn, and each of them needs a majority in parliament – with the two houses sitting jointly – to be elected. If, in the first round, there is no clear winner, other rounds follow until a winner emerges as weaker candidates withdraw. As no party has a commanding majority in parliament, each candidate needs to attract cross-party support to attain a majority. By a long-standing convention, incumbent federal councillors are almost always re-elected if they wish to remain in office. Since 1959, the seven seats in the Council have been divided among the four largest ‘government’ parties according to the so-called ‘magic formula’: FDP 2, CVP 2, SPS 2, and SVP 1. Additional unwritten proportionality rules stipulate that no more than one councillor should come from the same canton, and that the college should contain at least two French speakers and two women.

2. Electoral campaign

The campaign started early in 2003 but got under way in earnest from the end of August onwards. Even more so than in 1999, it was led by the SVP with its aggressive style, sharp political profile, and the most professional campaigning

² See Church (2004) for an introduction to the Swiss political system.

³ Six cantons which, for historical reasons, are called half-cantons, have one seat only each.

machine. Opinion polls indicated that the most pressing issues for voters' were, in order, the influx of asylum seekers, the state of the economy, reforms to the health and social security systems, and Switzerland's relationship with the European Union. The SVP played the campaign against a general sense of insecurity and the need to go back to the essence of the Swiss model to 'save' the country. On the one hand, the party linked societal insecurity in general, and crime in particular, to the rising numbers of immigrants and asylum seekers, campaigning strongly for tougher limits to entry and to welfare support once inside the country. On the other hand, it blamed the 'centre-left establishment' for economic mismanagement, leading to high budget deficits, rising taxes, 'red tape' imposed on industry, and low economic growth. On foreign policy, the SVP reiterated its intransigent defence of Swiss isolationism, again blaming the government and the establishment for ham-fisted negotiations on issues such as banking secrecy and entry into the EU's Schengen agreement.

The Socialists (SPS/PSS) tried to counter the SVP with a platform based on full engagement with Europe and the world, humane treatment of asylum seekers, and a renewed welfare state. They struggled to get their message across, however, remaining in a defensive position *vis-à-vis* the SVP, but at least offering a clear profile to the voters. The same could not be said of the FDP and the CVP, who did not take clear positions and ran very lacklustre campaigns. The FDP was also probably damaged by its close association with the establishment and the *status quo* and the proposal by its federal councillor Couchepin to raise the retirement age to 67. The campaign was thus fought on largely familiar issues but the style was more aggressive and confrontational than usual, and the media impact, especially of television, greater than in the past.

3. National Council results

In total, 262 party lists and 2852 candidates – 34.9% of whom were women – stood for election to the National Council, roughly the same figures as in 1999. Turnout rose, for the second time in a row, to 44.5%. Among the government parties, the SVP and SPS increased their share of votes and seats whilst the FDP and CVP declined compared to 1999. Among non-government parties, the Greens progressed significantly while the Liberals fell back and the minor fringe parties saw further erosion in support (see Table 1).

The SVP was the undisputed winner of the election. It won 26.7% of the popular vote and secured 55 seats. Although a less spectacular result than in 1999, this was still an advance of 4.2 points and 11 seats on the previous election. Traditionally the smallest of the government parties, the SVP is now, for the first time, the largest party in the country and in parliament. The Socialists gained only one percentage point (23.4%) and two extra seats, taking them to 52 seats in all. Even so, the Socialists remained below their 1995 tally of seats and lost their position as the largest party in the National Council. The Greens put in a strong performance, winning 7.6% of the votes and 13 seats – a gain of 2.6 points and four seats, taking them close to their 1991 peak. The major losers were the Christian-Democrats and

Table 1
Results of the National Council election, Switzerland 2003

	Seats 2003	Seats change 1999–2003	Votes 2003 (%)	Votes change 1999–2003 (% points)
Swiss People's Party [SVP/UDC]	55	+11	26.7	+4.2
Socialist Party [SPS/PSS]	52	+1	23.4	+1
Radical Democratic Party [FDP/PRD]	36	–7	17.3	–2.6
Christian Democratic Party [CVP/PDC]	28	–7	14.3	–1.6
<i>(Government parties)</i>	<i>(171)</i>	<i>(–2)</i>	<i>(81.7)</i>	<i>(+1)</i>
Green Party [GPS/PES]	13	+4	7.6	+2.6
Liberal Party [LPS/PLS]	4	–2	2.2	–0.1
Evangelical People's Party [EVP/PEV]	3	=	2.3	+0.5
Federal Democratic Union [EDU/UDF]	2	+1	1.3	=
Workers' Party [PdA/PST]	2	=	0.9	–0.1
Swiss Democrats [SD/DS]	1	=	1	–0.8
Alternative Left [FGA/AVF]	1	+1	0.5	+0.2
Solidarity [S] ^a	1	=	0.5	=
Christian Social Party [CSP/PCS]	1	=	0.4	=
League of the Ticinese [LdT]	1	–1	0.4	–0.5
Others	0	–1	1.2	–2.8
<i>(Non-government parties)</i>	<i>(29)</i>	<i>(+2)</i>	<i>(18.3)</i>	<i>(–1)</i>
Total	200	=	100	=
Turnout	44.5%	+1.2	–	–

Source: Swiss Federal Chancellery and Swiss Federal Parliament.

^a Solidarity was not represented in the previous parliament, but one seat was held by a representative from the same broad extreme-left movement.

the Radicals, the two oldest and once dominant parties. The CVP/PDC continued its downward trend, losing 1.6 points to 14.3% of the vote and seven seats. The FDP/PRD declined even more sharply, losing 2.6 points and seven seats. The other significant losers were the Liberals – a largely French-speaking, free market, and anti-centralisation party – who lost two of the six seats they held in 1999, although their share of the vote declined only marginally. The Liberals fell below five seats, the minimum number required to have an independent group in the National Council, and they had to join the Radicals. Overall, there was no shift in support to the right as the left maintained its appeal – even slightly increased it – to almost a third of voters. Electoral volatility, at 8.5%, remained broadly at the same level as in 1999.

4. Council of States results

Five seats were allocated before the National Council election, 33 seats were allocated in the first round on 19 October and eight seats went to the second round. Overall the CVP obtained 15 seats, the FDP 14, the SP nine, and the SVP eight (see Table 2). Compared to 1999, the Christian-Democrats held onto their share, the Radicals lost four seats while the Socialists and the People's party gained two seats

Table 2
Results of the Council of States election, Switzerland 2003

	Seats 2003	Seats change 1999–2003
Christian Democratic Party [CVP/PDC]	15	=
Radical Democratic Party [FDP/PRD]	14	–4
Socialist Party [SPS/PSS]	9	+2
Swiss People's Party [SVP/UDC]	8	+2
Total	46	=
Unweighted average turnout	43.9%	–

Source: Swiss Federal Parliament.

each. As in the elections for the lower house, the more extreme parties gained at the expense of the more moderate ones, notably the FDP. However, the moderating effects of the majoritarian system were confirmed, so the two centre-right parties still control the upper house and the SVP is still the smallest party there. Turnout averaged 43.9%, but three cantons registered participation rates above 50%.

5. Federal Council

Following its success in the elections, the SVP demanded a second seat in the Federal Council for its leader, Christoph Blocher, at the expense of the CVP, now the weakest of the four government parties. It threatened to withdraw into out-and-out opposition if rebuffed, which, in both substance and style, was at odds with the consensual ‘magic formula’ tradition of the Swiss political system. While the other parties and public opinion at large accepted the case for a second SVP seat, they had reservations about the party’s bargaining methods and Blocher’s personality. More importantly, the two centrist parties had no concerted strategy for dealing with the SVP, and they were profoundly divided internally. In the event, the two Socialist councillors were re-elected with large majorities, the FDP and SVP incumbents with smaller majorities but without real opposition, while Blocher, Deiss, and Merz had to fight off very strong competition. Blocher prevailed over Ruth Metzler (the incumbent CVP councillor) by just five votes in the third round. Deiss then defeated Metzler again, this time by 42 votes, while Merz won against Christine Beerli (a fellow FDP but a woman and more moderate) by 31 votes in the second round (see Table 3). The CVP thus lost the second seat it had held since 1919 and became the junior party in government. Thus, the composition of the Federal Council has shifted markedly to the right. Also, with two councillors from Zurich, the largest and most powerful canton, and only one woman, it is less ‘proportional’.

6. Discussion

Although the elections results were widely reported abroad as ‘revolutionary’, they were more a reflection of several trends already under way for some time than

Table 3
Results of the Federal Council election, Switzerland 2003

	Votes	First elected	Party	Canton	Language	Gender
Moritz Leuenberger	211	1995	SPS	Zurich	German	Male
Pascal Couchepin	178	1998	FDP	Valais	French	Male
Christoph Blocher	121	2003	SVP	Zurich	German	Male
Joseph Deiss	138	1999	CVP	Fribourg	German	Male
Samuel Schmid	167	2000	SVP	Berne	German	Male
Micheline Calmy-Rey	206	2002	SPS	Geneva	French	Female
Hans-Rudolf Merz	127	2003	FDP	Appenzell-AR	German	Male

Source: Swiss Federal Chancellery.

any sudden change of direction.⁴ What was novel was that the cumulative effects of these trends had a substantial impact on the composition of the government. Four main trends can be identified. First, the growth of polarisation and ideological distance, led by the rise of the SVP, and, to a lesser extent, of the left coupled with a decline of the centre. However, while the SVP's growth in the past was primarily at the expense of the small right-wing parties that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, it seems now to have eaten into the electorate of the traditional *bourgeois* parties. Secondly, this trend appears to be linked to a fading of the old cleavages, particularly the church-state cleavage incarnated by the CVP, the 'old' SVP, and the FDP, and the rising salience of new cleavages such as openness-isolation and development-downsizing of the welfare state. On this, the 'new' SVP and SPS are the protagonists. A third trend is the greater homogeneity of federal elections, due to the fading of cantonal specificities and the increasingly 'national' character of electoral competition. Prominent here are the SVP's penetration of the *Suisse Romande*, which has made the party a nation-wide force, and the decline of the Liberals, now facing extinction or a full merger with the FDP. If the greater polarisation of the political spectrum could be seen as a destabilising element, the closing of the linguistic and cantonal gap in political preferences is likely to act as a powerful counterbalance. Finally, there is the concentration of support for the government parties at the expense of minor parties. The four largest parties attracted almost 82% of the votes in 2003, more than 10 points above their score ten years ago.

The 2003 election results, and the broader trends that fuelled them, have had seismic effects on most parties. The SPS, the FDP, and the CVP are now going through a leadership change, and also some soul-searching in their electoral positioning and strategic choices *vis-à-vis* the SVP. Some members of the SPS, for example, think the party should withdraw into opposition and fight a right-wing government from the outside. This is unlikely to happen in the short run but remains a possibility in the longer term. The future will not be easy for the SVP, either. Arguably, as it can no longer 'play on two tables' – being in government and playing the outsider role – its sharper edge may be tamed by its increased responsibilities. Moreover, the upper house is still controlled by the centrist parties, hence dramatic changes in legislation

⁴ See Linder and Lutz (2002) for an analysis of the 1999 elections.

are unlikely to get overall parliamentary approval. Again, radical legislation would likely be defeated in referendums if too far away from the preferences of the median voter, who is still quite far removed from the SVP's position.

In all, then, as the clear shift to the right in the government was not matched by a corresponding shift in parliament and in the country, the Swiss system is likely to absorb the electoral shock. Its traditional decision-making style is likely to be retained, although it will undoubtedly be more difficult for the Federal Council to exercise coherent leadership. Likewise, despite a change of rhetoric and more emphasis on 'rolling back the state' and isolationism, public policy is unlikely to change dramatically. However, should these trends continue, the consensual nature of the system would be severely challenged and might not be able to function effectively without wide-ranging reforms.

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The parliamentary election in Cambodia, July 2003

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1. Background

A parliamentary election was held in Cambodia on 27 July 2003, but the outcome cannot be understood in isolation from Cambodia's recent electoral

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