

The parties in Switzerland's political life : conditioned by direct democracy - from the radical supremacy to the magic formula

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The parties in Switzerland's political life

Conditioned by direct democracy radical supremacy to the magic

Switzerland's party landscape is strongly marked by the way the country is governed. This article discusses the conditions in which the political parties arose, their main characteristics and the institutional and social background against which they work today.

The Swiss system of government is distinguished by its non-parliamentary, direct-democratic and federalist character. Since the federal state was established in 1848 very little has

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changed, in theory at least. At the heart of the system is the fact that the government does not depend on the confidence of parliament. The Federal Council – with its seven members – is both the supreme executive and responsible for the administration. Each federal councillor is the head of a department and in this capacity directs one branch of the administration. But he or she is also a member of the collective leadership of the country. Federal councillors are elected by parliament after the elections to the National Council which are held every four years. In the interval between such elections, neither a single member nor the collective leadership as a whole can be forced to resign.

The Federal Assembly was established in 1848 as both units of a two-chamber system meeting jointly. The National Council – with 200 members since 1962 – represents the population as a whole. Between 1848 and 1962, the number of members rose from 111 through 196 in tune with the number of inhabitants. Since 1848, however the Council of

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States has included two representatives only from each canton – now a total of 46 – regardless of their respective populations. The Federal Assembly's jurisdiction is limited by the Federal Council, for which it can certainly create difficulties but which it cannot overthrow, and by the people as sovereign, who can put in question or even reverse by their votes the policies of those whom it has elected to parliament in either direct or indirect elections. This is the purpose of our system of "people's rights", often described as "direct democracy". It includes the optional referendum on new

laws (since 1874), the compulsory referendum on constitutional changes and the right to amend the constitution by popular initiative (since 1891). Parliament has also remained weak by virtue of being the only legislative body left in Europe which works on a part-time basis.

Parties in the shadow of the referendum

There are a number of aspects in which direct democracy is of central importance for the federal state. Tried out in some cantons as early as 1831, its most important feature is the fact that it provides an element of interplay between government and opposition which does not exist anywhere else in the constitution. Direct democracy is the most important way in which existing groups or those formed for a specific purpose can make themselves heard. This takes place through a system of collecting signatures. In 1977 – after women were given the right to vote – the number of signatures required to provoke a referendum was raised from 30,000 to 50,000 and to bring about a popular initiative from 50,000 to 100,000.

Another important function of direct democracy is to enable political groups of all kinds (so-called pressure groups) to obtain a footing amongst the public easily and quickly without the necessity of stiff membership conditions. Almost all our political parties are in this sense "born of direct democracy" or "conditioned by the referendum". A consequence of this is that far right and far left splinter groups can force their way into political life fairly easily. Examples are National Action (today's Swiss Democrats) in 1970,



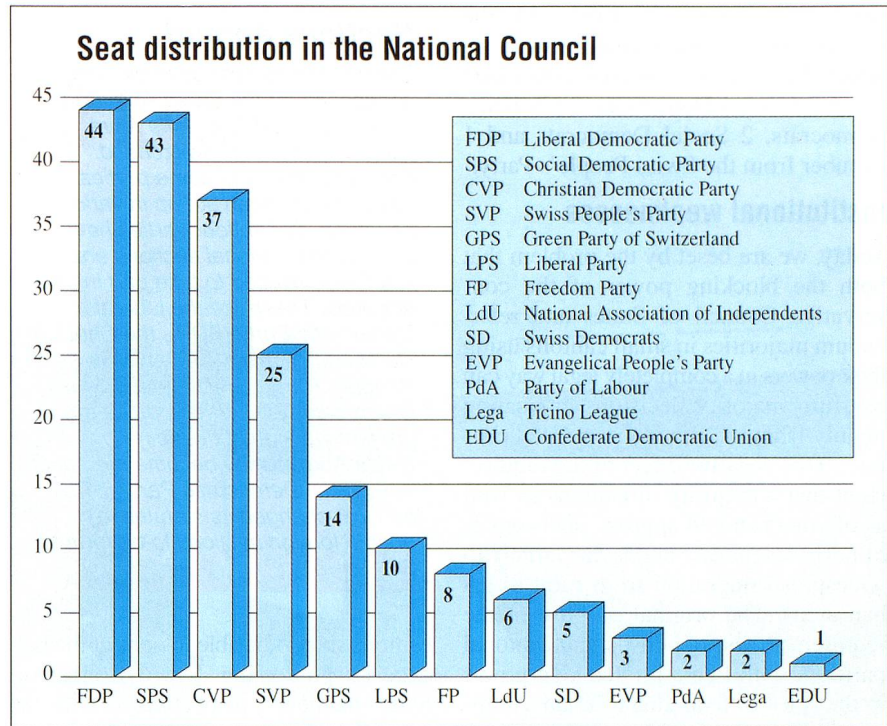
The first Federal Council, elected in 1848. Above: Josef Munziger, Olten, Canton Soleure; centre from left, Ulrich Ochsenbein, Thun, Canton Berne, Jonas Furrer, Winterthur, Canton Zurich, (first President of the Confederation), Henri Druey, Faoug, Canton Vaud; below from left, Wilhelm Matthias Näff, Altstätten, Canton St. Gall, Stefano Franscini, Bodio, Canton Ticino, Friedrich Frey-Herosé, Aarau, Canton Aargau. (Photo: Punctum Bildarchiv)

- from the formula

the Auto Party (today's Freedom Party) between 1986 and 1990, the Party of Labour in 1947, POCH in 1969 and the Greens in 1983. This feature of the Swiss party system also meant that the country's main political parties built up permanent and firmly anchored national organisations comparatively late in life: the Social Democrats in 1888, the Liberal Democrats in 1894, the Catholic Conservatives (now the Christian Democrats) in 1912 and the Farmers', Tradesmen's and Citizens' Party (now the Swiss People's Party) in 1918.

It also explains why for decades the parties consisted of only a few like-minded people of no very great importance, and their followers were activated as and when needed for referendum campaigns. For a long time the only real bond which held the parties together – this being true until far into the twentieth century – was the party newspaper ("Neue Zürcher Zeitung" since 1780, "Gazette de Lausanne" since 1798, "Der Landbote" since 1836, "Der Bund" since 1850). Most other such papers being published at the beginning of this century were started between 1870 and 1900 and have either disappeared or now depend on a big media group.

Yet another specific characteristic of direct democracy is that thanks to the referendum new groups may more easily "force" executive bodies at the municipal, cantonal or even the federal level to let them in. The system of



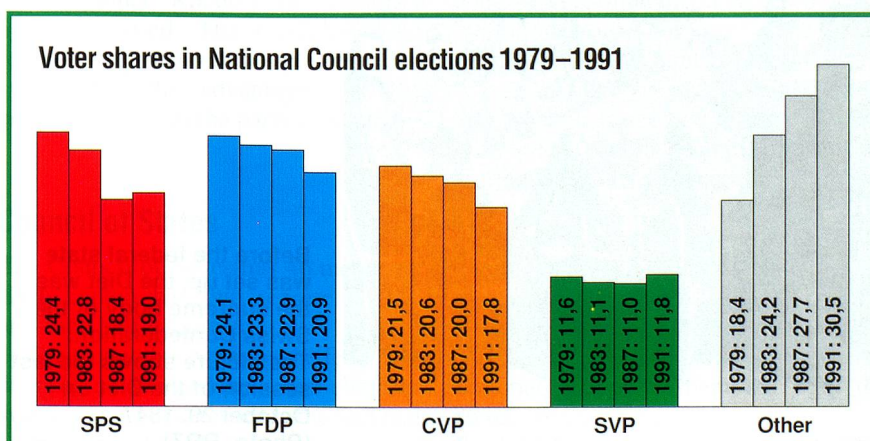
collective responsibility makes such shifts in power easier, since the changes require neither special legal provisions nor coalition agreements. A newcomer must of course recognise the current rules of the game, while parties already in government must accept his concerns as legitimate. Yet another feature of direct democracy is that a party represented in an executive may contest a proposal which has been worked out with the help of its "own" members. All this means that in a very real sense direct democracy replaces the element of the vote of confidence which is missing from the parliamentary part of the system.

From majority to proportional voting

The federal state set up in 1848 was the creation of the radical nationalist revol-

ution. A time of turmoil both at home and abroad made it essential that the will of the people should be respected as much as possible. The result was that in 1848 Switzerland became the first country in Europe to introduce the principle of equal, general and direct voting rights. But it was also felt necessary at the time to prevent popular reactions which might be too violent. In consequence, 25% to 30% of the lower classes were in fact excluded from the voting process between 1848 and about 1890 – which was of course contrary to the principle of equality. In addition, the first-past-the-post electoral system was so much manipulated in favour of the radicals by means of "constituency gerrymandering" that the latter were able to obtain 55% to 60% of members of parliament with only about 40% of votes. This permanent advantage for the ruling party was corrected only with the introduction of proportional representation in 1919.

The majority system was connected with yet another component which direct democracy anchored in Swiss government. With the increases in popular rights of 1874 and 1891, those in opposition were provided with a new way of forcing the Radicals – who nevertheless remained paramount until 1919 – to let representatives of both conservative and reformist opposition parties into the Federal Council (Catholic Conservatives in 1891, the Farmers', Tradesmen's and Citizens' Party in 1930 and Social Democrats in 1943). The process



reached its apogee in 1959 with the establishment of the magic formula, by which the Federal Council is now made up of 2 Liberal Democrats, 2 Christian Democrats, 2 Social Democrats and 1 member from the Swiss People's Party.

Institutional weaknesses

Today, we are beset by the problem that both the blocking power of the conservative Council of States and referendum majorities in small cantons using their powers in a completely legal way can overturn majority decisions emanating mainly from the heavily populated cantons. This negative effect of the requirement that a majority of cantons as well as of voters should approve decisions is of fairly recent date and is due largely to widespread migration from rural to urban areas. The original purpose of the requirement was to allow small cantonal parties to build up a limited veto power in the spirit of federalism. It had a compensatory effect within the national political parties by providing local majorities and minorities which often cut across party lines. But it has to be recognised that things have changed. It now appears that minorities and majorities of cantons involving linguistic groups or groups of small cantons could disrupt or even destroy the delicate balance of the whole country. I believe that our system of government as it operates today requires two major reforms.

- The electorate as a whole finds it frustrating that each of 11½ small and medium-sized cantons (the biggest of which has fewer than 140,000 people with the right to vote) carries as much weight as, for example, Canton Zurich, with 770,000 potential voters. Ideally speaking, medium-large and large

Sections abroad

The introduction of voting by correspondence for the Swiss Abroad has led political parties to take more interest in the Fifth Switzerland. Foreign sections of some parties have already been set up in various countries. So far, four parties have opened international sections enabling Swiss Abroad to take part in their activities. These are the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), the Christian Democratic Party (CVP), the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Swiss Democrats (SD). Other parties are at present working out exactly how Swiss Abroad may become members. The Social Democratic Party (SPS) has just changed its statutes to enable foreign sections to be formed.
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cantons should be able to correct the balance by possessing 3 to 6 Council of State members respectively, with an equivalent number of votes. Over the years, federalism has developed into an anti-centralist mechanism, whereas it was originally intended to protect cultural diversity.

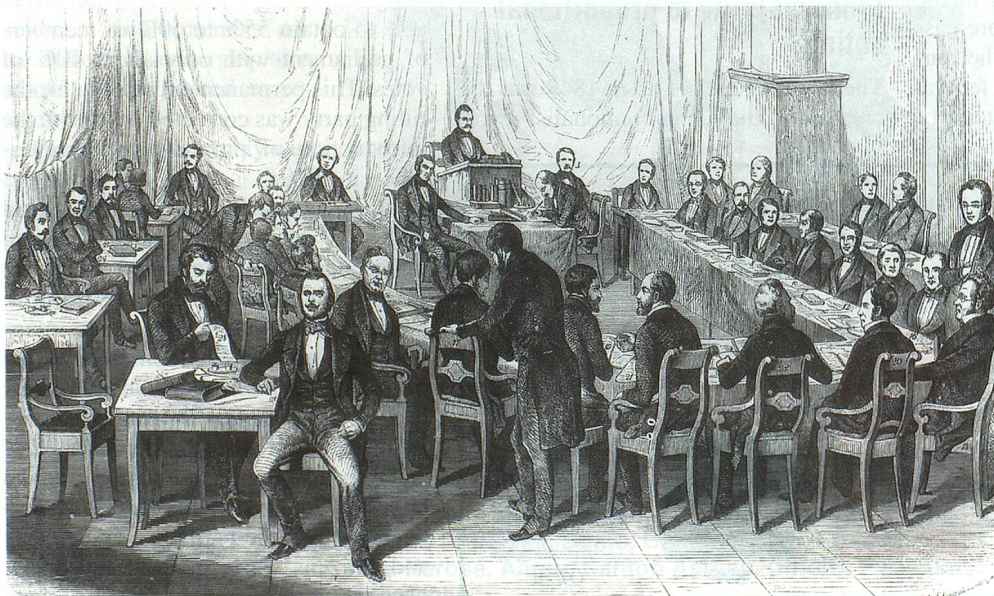
- The second urgent need is for the present part-time parliament to be at long last transformed into a professional legislative body. Opponents of this justify their position by claiming that the people's representatives would lose contact with the people. But how do they expect "hobby" parliamentarians to act as "shoulders to weep on" which, for example, members of the British House of Commons do so well? The problem here is not the large number of company directors in parliament – which arouses protest in some quarters – but the lack of time available for thorough examina-

tion of urgent new laws. This work-load argument is also true for the Federal Council, which invariably opposes any attempt to increase its members or to appoint deputies.

Decline in political interest

But the biggest problem overall is the decline in political interest seen not only in Switzerland but throughout the western world. Most of the newspapers, for example, which in earlier days kept the parties going by discussing the pros and cons of the political issues of the day, are now in the hands of a few big media concerns. And the many "hand-to-mouth" discussion programmes on television have also contributed to a situation where it is extremely difficult for people to obtain a general view of events. Today, politics consists mainly in a game of substitution, putting some politicians on pedestals and hurling abuse at others. Serious discussion has been replaced by opinion polls and public relations stunts of the kind used so effectively in Italy by Silvio Berlusconi.

We are living in an age in which the combination of science, technology and capital has created a new ideology which has led not only to the "permissive society" but also to a climate in which opposing arguments, however serious, are made to look ridiculous by being taken to absurd lengths. In this way, constructive thought is replaced by a static ideology used only to justify the argument that nothing should be changed. One of the few statesmen of original thought of our day put it this way: "States in decline are those which refuse all idea of reform". This was the vision of Milovan Djilas for Yugoslavia!



Before the federal state was set up, the Diet was the supreme body of the Swiss Confederation. The picture shows the last session of the Diet on October 29, 1847. (Photo: RDZ)