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“We can look forward to a boring election.”

This October's federal elections will not bring about any major changes in parliament, merely minor shifts within the left- and right-wing camps. Political scientist Hans Hirter, a professor at Berne University, explains why the situation is so stable in Switzerland. Interview by Heinz Eckert

“SWISS REVIEW:” *The elections of 20 years ago were dubbed the “elections of hope”, the environment was the main campaign issue and the Greens were expected to win. Do you see any parallels between then and now?*

HANS HIRTER: I certainly don't see any parallels in terms of the slogan. Even back then, hopes of a Green Federal Council were illusionary. Nobody expects anything of the sort nowadays. Even the environment is just one of many election issues this year. The Greens are expected to perhaps gain a few seats, but not to have the kind of resounding success that the SVP had. In fact, I don't see any parallels with 20 years ago.

Haven't the Greens got even better chances of success than they had 20 years ago?

You could say that the Greens are now an established party and still have potential.



Prof. Hans Hirter

Twenty years ago, people still doubted whether they could make a breakthrough. On the other hand, they were the only party

that espoused environmental protection. Today they all do, so there is no longer any reason to vote for the Greens.

Isn't it also the case that the Greens are seen as less of a classic left-wing party than they were? Doesn't the party have a broader base now?

No. I think the Greens have a more clearly left-wing position than they had in the past. Back then the party was still a motley group of defectors from a variety of parties, even centre-right ones. You can see from their activity in the National Council that they are no less left-wing now than when they were founded. But it's true that many voters consider the Green Party less left-wing than the SP. Perhaps that's partly because it isn't saddled with the “burden” of the trade unions.

Environmental issues are also less ideological and more acceptable nowadays. Even centre-right parties and companies are addressing the issue. Does that help the Greens?

It's true that no-one can afford not to take the environment seriously anymore. But that has also earned the Greens competition from other parties. The Green Party no longer has a monopoly on the environment. The majority of voters don't like ascetic purity in environmental policies anyway and prefer the

SWISSINFO LAUNCHES ELECTION PLATFORM

Swissinfo's new content for the 2007 election year is multi-medial, independent and – most importantly – targeted specifically at the Swiss abroad.

In addition to an election special and an election blog, the previously separate swisspolitics Web site will be integrated into swissinfo and its content expanded.

The federal elections are the central domestic political topic of 2007. Swissinfo has therefore put together a major election special which will be further enhanced in July by the addition of the online “Smartvote” tool and the SRG

election exchange. Although the election is also being reported in all the other Swiss media, swissinfo's content differs in one key respect: swissinfo has a remit to supply specifically the Swiss abroad with information. In addition to providing information on the 2007 federal elections, swissinfo encourages the Swiss abroad to discuss their concerns, the election issues and the candidates on the World Wide Web. Together with the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, it has set up an election blog in German, French and Italian to serve as an international discussion platform. In or-

der to get the ball rolling, the editorial team has posted a series of hypotheses on a variety of issues (integration, crime and e-voting). Readers can respond to these articles either in their own name or using a pseudonym. The only conditions are that the comments are respectable and factual and in no way slanderous. In the second stage, a feature for posing questions to politicians will be added to the communication platform. Candidates for seats in the Federal Assembly will then be able to present themselves briefly and reply to questions from the Swiss abroad. These question-

and-answer sessions will also be part of the 2007 election blog.

Finally in late August or early September, swissinfo will organise live chat sessions with selected candidates at different times of the day. At this stage, the would-be national councillors will be able to answer questions immediately rather than some time after they are posted.

LINKS • swissinfo: election special (www.swissinfo.org/eng/elections/index.html?siteSect=1530) • Election blog (<http://wahlen.swissinfo.org/>) • swissinfo: Politics (www.swissinfo.org/eng/politics/index.html.html?siteSect=1500) • Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (www.aso.ch/)

approach the CVP or the FDP takes to the matter.

What effect will the SP's defeat in Zurich have on the National Council elections?

It is significant inasmuch as the existing trend was simply more pronounced in Zurich. The SP is having difficulty holding onto its supporters everywhere, and has been losing votes to the Greens throughout the country. That may also be the case in the forthcoming National Council elections.

What other campaign issues apart from the environment will the electioneering focus on?

There will be a wide range of issues. The SVP will probably focus on foreigners and the minaret ban, maybe also relations with the EU, depending on how the so-called "tax row" plays out. The CVP will try to win votes with family-friendly policies. The left-wingers will undoubtedly enter the fray with phrases like "fat-cat salaries" and "low taxes for the rich". The FDP will have difficulty positioning itself and has an uphill struggle ahead. The Liberals will probably continue to lose votes, whereas the CVP seems to have recovered and will hold on to its share of the vote. The FDP is well on the way to becoming a "10-percent party", as is the case in other European countries, and is gradually changing from an establishment and people's party into an economics party for higher earners.

Can't liberal ideas be conveyed attractively anymore?

When liberal ideas are put into political and economic practice, the results are often difficult for many to accept. Take for example the globalisation of the economy, job cuts, the slimming down of the state and the increase in the pension age.

Do you then think that the SVP will achieve its objective of winning an extra 100,000 votes?

That would indeed be a major coup for the SVP, especially since the turnout won't be any larger than four years ago. The shifts in the centre-right camp are likely to be by about a half to one percent, which the FDP will probably lose to the Greens or the EVP.

In other words, nothing will change after these elections either?

That's what I assume. There will be minor shifts within the left-wing and Green camp.

How do you explain this incredible stability in Switzerland?

The stability is primarily due to the fact that the Swiss people can also vote on specific issues through referenda and therefore correct parliamentary decisions. That's why there's no need to change allegiances at every election. Even when there is relatively high unemployment and economic problems, the majority of Swiss people see no reason for seeking protection from left-wing parties. They are aware that political life is not determined exclusively in Berne. That's how we differ from other countries.

Do the federal councillors have more influence on the elections than they did in the past?

That's difficult to say. Sure, Federal Councillor Blocher campaigns, but I don't think that the federal councillors have a great influence.

What do you think about popular election of the Federal Council?

I'm against it. Federal councillors should govern and lead their ministry well during their four-year mandate, not campaign in order to secure their personal re-election. In any case, there's no country anywhere in the world where the people elect their ministers.

So we can expect the federal elections to pass without incident?

Yes, I believe so. Everyone has staked out their territory and there will be no surprises. The elections will be boring, which in turn reflects the quality of

our political system. We don't need the kind of electioneering banter that you get in other countries.

What would you say to a foreigner who asked you to name the greatest political problems in Switzerland? The minaret ban and dangerous dogs and the removal of assault weapons from private households?

Just like every other small western and northern European state, Switzerland really doesn't have any major problems to solve in comparison to other countries. That's why we can spend lots of time arguing about dangerous dogs, minarets and service weapons. These are "wealth problems". However, prosperity also creates new social problems. For example, young people have to learn that not everything is free. The willingness and will to work must be promoted once again in all areas as a matter of urgency. At present we have a kind of "wealth-related decline" in this respect. This is something that we have to combat.

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