

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 38 (2011)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The elections in Switzerland and the disaster in Japan : will there be a Fukushima effect?
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907343>

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Will there be a Fukushima effect?

The Greens celebrated major success at the Swiss federal elections after the Chernobyl reactor accident 25 years ago.

It is unclear whether the Fukushima disaster will now also have an impact on the elections in October. The political environment has changed since Chernobyl. By Heinz Eckert

Before the nuclear disaster in the Japanese city of Fukushima, all the polls indicated that the Swiss People's Party (SVP) would be victorious in the federal elections on 23 October. Christoph Blocher's fellow campaigners were sweeping the other parties aside with their manifesto. The debates have primarily focused on refugees from North Africa, immigrants from Eastern Europe, the relationship with the European Union and the increasing pressure to conform, and concordance within the Federal Council. It is as yet unclear whether the political agenda will shift as a result of the catastrophic events in Japan. The Social Democrats, the Greens and the recently formed Green Liberals received a significant media boost after the incident and were able to highlight their already established positions on nuclear power stations. This culminated in a large-scale march against nuclear power during the traditional Easter marches.

CVP Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard was also quick to react as the Swiss energy minister and called for the approval procedures for new nuclear power stations in Switzerland to be suspended immediately. However, she had to play down this demand shortly afterwards as her party is completely split on this issue, as is the FDP. Leading politicians hold differing views on nuclear power in both conservative parties. Whereas Federal Councillor Johann Schneider-Ammann is arguing for the abandonment of nuclear power after lengthy consideration, Georg Bührer, as President of Economie-suisse, the umbrella organisation representing Swiss businesses, is advocating the exact opposite. FDP President Fulvio Pelli is managing to present even this internal dispute as a plus point for his party. He says the difference in opinion simply goes to prove that FDP policy is independent of the umbrella organisation for business in Switzerland.

Waiting until the furore dies down

The SVP, which does not usually overlook any major issues, has had very little to say on

this matter. It is leaving its rivals to take up a prominent stance on this delicate issue, probably in the hope that the furore will have died down by the autumn and that the Swiss people will be focusing on other issues again by then. The Greens have evidently benefitted from topical environmental issues several times at elections in the past – in 1987 they benefitted from the Chernobyl disaster, in 2003 from the summer heatwave, which brought environmental concerns to the fore, and in 2007 from Al Gore's film on the climate, which triggered environmental hype worldwide. He helped the Greens in Switzerland achieve their largest ever share of the vote (9.6 %).

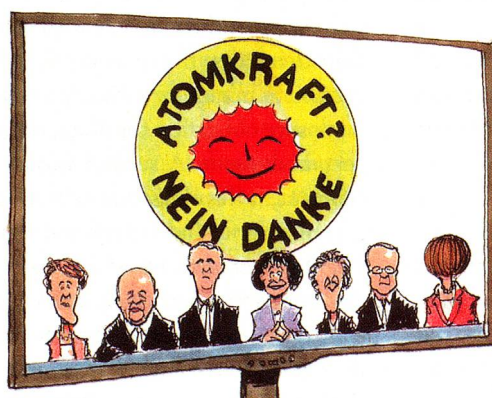
It is not clear as to whether there will be a Fukushima effect and, if so, whether this will last until Election Day on 23 October. Although the Greens and Green Liberals emerged as winners at the elections in the cantons of Basel-Landschaft and Zurich at the end of March and beginning of April, experts do not believe that events in Japan had a major impact on these elections. "If there had been strong interest in current events, the turnout would have been higher in both cases", says Lukas Golder of the GFS research institute in Berne. The fact that the red/green camp did not increase its share of the vote overall would also suggest that no Fukushima effect occurred. It was a differ-

ent situation in Germany, where a Fukushima effect was certainly felt at the elections in Baden-Württemberg, but Golder explains this by saying that "the only way people in Germany can express protest is through elections".

The Zurich-based political scientist, Michael Hermann, presents a similar line of argument, indicating that there is a clear difference between referenda on specific policies and elections. "It will undoubtedly be much more difficult now to win the support of the electorate for a new nuclear power station than it was before Fukushima", he says but predicts: "Any Fukushima effect will have further abated by the time of the autumn elections." He goes on to argue that the nuclear issue will be decided at a referendum in Switzerland and not at the elections. In Switzerland, the electorate has rarely sought to lay down a marker for a particular direction or to punish politicians at election time, as is constantly the case in Germany, for example.

No abandonment in sight

One thing is for sure and that is that events in Japan will have an impact on future Swiss energy policy. Just as the accident in Chernobyl spelt the end for the planned nuclear power plant in Kaiseraugst in 1987, a year after the catastrophe, Fukushima will give momentum to the opponents of nuclear power and will help promote alternative energy production. However, powerful business groups have already indicated their opposition to the abandonment of nuclear power. And, as electricity consumption continues to rise in Switzerland and 40% of this is provided by nuclear power plants, it is likely to take some time and involve significant cost before any abandonment can become a reality.



"Nuclear power? No thanks – Electioneering? No thanks!"