

Women with a foot in the political door

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **48 (2021)**

Heft 1

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051897>

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The striking motif of a carpet beater. A campaign poster from the 1947 Zurich referendum on women's suffrage.

Photo: Keystone



Argument from the Yes camp – “A free people need free women” (1946)

Zurich Museum of Design, poster collection



unable to work as a judge because she lacked full civil rights. Kempin-Spyri took her case to the Federal Supreme Court – and lost. She argued that the constitution's provisions on suffrage also pertained to women. The presiding judges called this reasoning “both novel and audacious”.

A personal price to pay

At the turn of the 20th century, more and more women – and men – began campaigning for women's suffrage. The government in Berne was slow to act, while certain cantons took matters into their own hands. Social change at the end of the 1960s finally brought the matter to a head at the federal level. In 1990, Appenzell Innerrhoden became the last canton to introduce women's suffrage, on the order of the Federal Supreme Court.

“Again, it was a marathon, not a sprint,” says Sahlfeld-Singer, who was emphatically re-elected in 1975 but later resigned. Sahlfeld-Singer's husband was no longer able to find work in eastern Switzerland because of his wife's political career. The family left Switzerland and made a new start near Cologne. Sahlfeld-Singer is one of the women who blazed a trail for future generations of female politicians in Berne. Commemorative plaques today adorn their old seats in parliament. “Our fight was worth it,” she concludes, even if she and her husband paid their own personal price. People now take equality for granted in many areas of life, she adds. “But women must hang on to what they have achieved, otherwise they may lose it again.”

More information on 50 years of women's suffrage in Switzerland:
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Women with a foot in the political door

It is 50 years since women in Switzerland were first entitled to vote and stand for election. Female political participation is growing, but a little more effort is necessary to ensure a proper gender balance.

EVA HIRSCHI

Some 84 women were elected to the National Council in 2019 – 20 more than in 2015. This is the biggest increase since the introduction of women's suffrage in 1971. At 42 per cent, female representation in the National Council has never been as high. In the Council of States, where the female contingent had been dwindling over the previous 12 years, the proportion of women climbed to a record 26 per cent. “This sends a strong message and was well overdue,” says Kathrin Bertschy, Green Liberal National Councillor for the canton of Berne. “It reflects a new zeitgeist, of which the women's strike was symptomatic.” Bertschy is co-chair of alliance f, a cross-party umbrella organisation of women's associations that are campaigning for better gender balance in parliament. Alliance f is behind the “Helvetia ruft” campaign, which aims to help more women get into politics.

“Not only have we urged political parties and those responsible for nominating candidates to put women on party lists where they have good chances, but we have also organised workshops and mentoring programmes for female candidates,” explains Flavia Kleiner, co-initiator of “Helvetia ruft”. “It is not about achieving fairness, it is about accurately reflecting Switzerland's demographics. Women account for half of our population after all.”

Catching up on 170 years

But why has it taken 50 years for parliament to suddenly become noticeably more female? “Men have had a 170-year head start, while women have been trying to play catch-up,” says Kleiner. “So we need a little time.” Swiss politics has been a man's world until now, says Bertschy: “When they gave women the right to vote, they forgot to ensure that we were adequately represented to the same extent as the cantons and the language regions are in the National Council. But the Confederation does love dealing in quotas – I tick one of their boxes as a woman from Berne.”

However, not only have women been poorly represented in parliament for a long time, but there has traditionally been a dearth of female candidates. Flavia Kleiner believes that societal constraints are the main factor hindering female involvement. “It is not easy to reconcile a political career with family life. Meetings and events often take place in the evening or at weekends. In addition, Swiss political culture is still male-dominated with its attendant rough and tumble. And then we have the media, who are less forgiving towards women.”

With political office therefore less of a draw for women, more of an effort is needed to convince would-be candidates to put themselves forward, says Sarah Bütikofer, a political scientist who is conducting a study on female political participation. Bütikofer believes that political parties are best placed to act: “Switzerland’s political parties are organised along cantonal lines. They have the power to put women’s names forward on promising party lists.”

Anyone who wants to be elected to the National Council or the Council of States normally needs experience at cantonal level. Very few people are catapulted directly into the federal parliament. “It is in the national arena where a party’s political leaders are active,” says Bütikofer. “Hence, women must be given opportunities at cantonal and municipal level, so that we have a conveyor belt of female politicians who are ready for higher office.”

Too cautious? Or less confident?

Yet, it is precisely at cantonal level where Switzerland is still a long way from achieving gender equality. In 2019, women accounted for 25 to 29 per cent of politicians in the cantonal parliaments. Basel-Stadt managed to increase the proportion of females in its cantonal parliament to 42 per cent at the end of October 2020. But meanwhile Aargau again elected a cantonal government comprised exclusively of men. The proportion of women in Aargau’s cantonal parliament even fell.

For Martina Sigg, leader of the FDP women’s group in Aargau, this is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. “We are actually finding it quite hard to recruit women in some districts of Aargau,” she says. “Women are a lot more cautious and less sure of their political abilities. We often have to make the first contact and persuade them ourselves. They rarely come to us.” Which is why Sigg believes campaigns like “Helvetia ruft” are important. However, when Jean-Pierre Gallati from the SVP and Yvonne Feri from the SP

faced each other in an election run-off for the Aargau cantonal government in 2019, Sigg voted for the male candidate. “The SVP were entitled to the seat, plus I think Gallati was better suited for the job. Voting along party or gender lines – which is more important? Party lines in my view. But I would naturally have been very happy if the SVP had nominated an able female candidate.”

Non-party politics

Standing for election is one thing, voting is another. Swiss women have tended to be slightly reluctant voters. According to the Swiss Election Study (Selects), there was a 49 per cent turnout among male voters in the 2019 federal elections. Female voter turnout was only 41 per cent.

Could it be that women are turned off by the institutionalised nature of politics? After all, the 2019 women’s strike, which saw hundreds of thousands of female protesters take to the streets, showed that women are more than willing to speak up when they want. Lisa Gafner: “I took part in the women’s strike myself. For the past two years, I have also been involved in the EKdM [Eidgenössische Kommission dini Mueter] – a pressure group that we set up after the women’s strike to get a better deal for working mothers.”

Gafner, 38, has consciously decided not to join any political party. “I have no wish to get drawn into petty infighting, personality cults, or toeing the party line. The issues are what matter to me.” Gafner’s pressure group is lobbying on these issues. “What the EKdM is doing is one thing. But run for a political office? Never. A structured environment like that has no appeal. And it would be too hard to reconcile work and family life.”

National Councillor Kathrin Bertschy is in favour of alternative forms of political participation. Nevertheless, she adds: “It is important that women are represented in parliament instead of just leaving the decisions to men. Because parliament is where women can bring about the most change by improving the legislation and parameters that matter.”



Flavia Kleiner says that women are playing catch-up: “Men have had a 170-year head start.”



Katrin Bertschy on the increasing proportion of women in parliament: “This sends a strong message and was well overdue.”



Sarah Bütikofer: “The political parties have the power to put women’s names forward.”