

Sharp turn to the right in Swiss elections

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In the elections to the Swiss federal parliament at the end of October, the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) rose to become the strongest single party. The SVP increased its vote by 7.7 percent, winning 22.6 percent of the overall vote and overtaking the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SPS), which polled 22.5 percent.

The election result will, in all probability, have no influence on the makeup of the government. Since 1959, Switzerland has been ruled by a series of "grand coalitions". The system of so-called "*Konkordanzdemokratie*" ("concordance democracy") determines the relative position of parties within a four-party government. The Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), Christian Democrats (CVP), SPS and SVP provide seven federal ministers, in the ratio 2:2:2:1 (the so-called "magic formula"), and rotate the office of federal president between themselves annually.

The 43.3 percent turnout was not unusually low and is about 1 percent higher than at the last election four years before. In the first half of the century, 70 to 80 percent of the population participated in Swiss parliamentary elections. With the introduction of a permanent grand coalition, this dropped rapidly to its current low level, since voters could effectively exercise no influence on the composition of the government. A very low turnout was recorded in the larger urban cantons, as well as in western Switzerland.

The SVP has so far relied mainly on farmers and small businessmen. Formed in 1971, it represents a nationalist and anti-socialist tradition. The SVP writes of its precursor, founded in 1918, the year of the general strike: "The political advance of the socialists, as well as the conviction of younger farmer politicians that the Liberals were not acting energetically enough against socialist, anti-militarist and internationalist tendencies, played a not inconsiderable role in the establishment of the BGB."

As long as the Swiss state kept the lid on tensions between different social interests by a carefully balanced "social partnership", the BGB/SVP did not play an especially prominent role in the post-war period. Only since a section of the bourgeoisie broke with this consensus has a party such as Christoph Blocher's SVP—like Joerg Haider's FPO in Austria—acquired significance.

Of the political demands of the SVP—"less state interference", "lower taxes", "fewer foreigners", "no to entry in the European Union"—the latter probably won it the most support. Party leader Blocher, a billionaire and large shareholder, polemicises against the "sell-out of the homeland". He portrays the European Union Commission as the "Steward of Brussels", against whom the descendants of William Tell have to defend their liberty. The maintenance of Swiss isolation is presented as a guarantee against inexorable neo-liberal globalisation. In reality Switzerland has, for centuries, drawn its prosperity from its economic activities around the world.

While the SVP is extremely conservative and authoritarian regarding social questions, it argues for an ultra-liberal economic policy. It directs its fire against every social reform and all forms of state interference with private enterprise, and calls for a lowering of the tax burden by 10 percent.

The recent and most glaring historical falsification by Blocher is directed against the demands on the Swiss banks by Jewish victims of the Nazis. In an interview with the Israeli daily *Jediot Aharonot* two days after his election success, Blocher compared the boycott threats made by Jewish organisations against the Swiss banks in 1997 and 1998 with the boycott of Jewish business by German Nazis in the 1930s.

How is it to be explained that such crude and reactionary policies suddenly become politically acceptable and gain so many votes?

Firstly, purely in terms of the figures, a vote of 22.6 percent under conditions of an election turnout of 43.3 percent means that fewer than 10 percent of the electorate cast their ballot for Blocher. The SVP is increasingly financed by sections of big business, which enables it to have a large apparatus and conduct demagogic campaigns country-wide, bombarding the electorate with paid advertisements and flyers.

It consciously addresses the older generation, particularly those who were assigned to protect Switzerland's borders during the Second World War, and encourages their resentments by denouncing those who have exposed the

collaboration of the Swiss banks with the Nazi regime. The SVP monopolises the right-wing camp and has profited from the disappearance or absorption of several smaller right-wing parties.

All these circumstances contributed to the SVP's election victory, but they do not explain it completely. The crucial reason why the SVP was able to gain so much support from among lower-middle-class layers of society lies elsewhere. There was no party in the election that credibly championed the interests of working people and the socially disadvantaged, and which represented even a trace of opposition to the prevailing right-wing concepts.

The editorials in some newspapers noted an absence of serious debates and controversies among the competing parties. "If an election campaign means that different political leaders and concepts clash in the contest—then no election campaign took place," wrote the *Tagesanzeiger* on October 18.

The proposals of the SVP, no matter how reactionary, did not face a single voice of serious opposition. Quite the opposite: almost all the traditional parties tried to keep hold of their voters by adapting to the right-wing demagoguery of the SVP.

How little separates the positions of the leading political parties is revealed in the question of immigrants' rights, where the SVP pursues a particularly reactionary policy. It relentlessly complains about the "abuse of asylum", charging that some 90 percent of refugees are illegitimate, and intensifies nationalist tensions by demanding separate school classes for foreign children. In addition, it calls for a popular vote in every case of naturalisation. It supports a "referendum to regulate immigration", which would limit the proportion of foreigners allowed into Switzerland to 18 percent. At the same time, it insists that foreign labour, in particular seasonal workers (who may only stay for nine months in Switzerland in any case), be regulated according "to the needs of individual industries and regions".

In the election campaign, FDP President Franz Steinegger was anxious to explain that his asylum policy corresponded with 90 percent of the SVP's. The FDP majority do not support the "18 Percent Initiative", which originated with a Liberal politician in the Aargauer regional council, only because it runs contrary to the interests of the economy. Individual FDP politicians in the Zurich local council even supported the demand for separate classes.

While the FDP and the CVP endorse a similarly restrictive immigration policy, and agree ideologically with the xenophobia of the SVP, the Social Democrats refuse to counterpose a substantially different policy.

In a party discussion paper ("For a humane migration and refugee policy") the SPS say that Switzerland cannot be

open to all who want to earn their living or build a new life within the Swiss borders. It endorses a special quota for workers from developing countries and proposes the deportation of any foreigner who commits a crime.

The Social Democrats are no longer able to mobilise potential voters over matters for which they fought decades ago, and which are directly connected with the party's name.

Without doubt, social tensions in Switzerland have recently intensified more strongly than in all the years since the Second World War. Rigid austerity measures have been pursued for years, to which almost everything is subordinated. The retirement age for women was raised from 62 to 64 years; unemployment benefits have been cut; state employees have had to accept "wage sacrifices".

As in every other country, company mergers, factory closures and dismissals are on the agenda. Since the beginning of the 90s, the largest state-run concerns, such as the Post Office and National Railways, have each cut some 5,000 jobs and implemented partial privatisations—the best known example being Swisscom.

Two years ago unemployment in Zurich reached a new record of almost 9 percent—this in a country where unemployment has been low since the 1930s. Although it has decreased slightly since then, in the countryside and in more remote areas unemployment continues to grow.

The new jobs that have been created often have a completely different character. For example, as the head of the Zurich labour office explained to the *Tagesanzeiger*, call centres operating 24 hours a day are shooting out of the ground like mushrooms. In the service sector, a new profession has developed: the "freelancer", who for a small cash payment offers so-called personal services, but without a fixed contract or social security provisions.

The gap between the super-rich, on the one hand, and those who have to fight for their daily bread has widened substantially, while a layer in the social centre is increasingly afraid for its possessions, status and future. The elections represent not only a shift to the right, but a social polarisation, which is only reflected in the election result in a distorted way, because the less well-off social layers do not have any political representation.



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