

# Swiss elections: End of political consensus?

Marianne Arens  
11 November 2003

The parliamentary elections of October 19 have severely shaken the long-standing so-called concordance-democracy in Switzerland. The rise of the right-wing Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) to the biggest fraction in parliament threatens to break up the system of collective party government that has been in practice since 1959.

The elections show a clear polarisation: the SVP is now the strongest party with 26.6 percent, while the Social Democrats and Greens were also able to make considerable gains. The Social Democratic Party (SPS) won 23.3 percent of the vote, while the Green Party (GPS) obtained 7.4 percent.

The traditional bourgeois parties—the Liberal-Democratic Party (FDP) and the Christian Democratic Peoples Party (CVP)—suffered severe losses: the FDP received only 17.3 percent and lost seven mandates, while the CVP lost eight mandates with 14.4 percent. The polarisation between the left and right wing was most extreme among young people entitled to vote for the first time. Twenty-eight percent of this group voted for the Social Democrats, while 26 percent voted for the SVP.

The Swiss Peoples Party, run by the billionaire industrialist owner of chemical plants and right-wing populist Christoph Blocher, will hold 55 of the 200 seats in the Swiss parliament and has thus taken over from the Social Democrats, which were the largest fraction until now. Six of their new mandates were won in the region Suisse Romande, and the SVP even won one mandate from the traditionally “red” city of Geneva. Suisse Romande is the French-speaking part of Switzerland, where until now there had only been small support for the SVP. It was above all the large number of non-voters who made the SVP the strongest party.

Nevertheless, the gains made by the SVP have consequences that threaten to put an end to the Swiss political system, because the SVP is now demanding an extra seat in the seven-strong National Council. The SVP is demanding this seat be given to Blocher, or the party will go into opposition.

Traditionally, the composition of the National Council (i.e., the Swiss government) is not determined by the strongest party or a parliamentary coalition. Since 1959, the Council has been formed on the basis of a fixed ratio of distribution. This so-called “magic formula” would provide the FDP, CVP and Social Democrats with two seats, while the SVP—the former Peasants Party—is to take one seat. This so-called “concordance-democracy” includes all major parties and prevents the emergence of an opposition. All important decisions require the consent of all seven delegates in the National Council.

The Social Democrats had first accepted this kind of permanent compromise—in which the “bourgeois bloc” consisting of the FDP

and CVP mostly set the tone—in 1929. In that year, the Social Democrats split from its communist wing and then vainly attempted to gain a seat in the National Council. They were first granted a seat in the Council in 1943 during the Second World War, after the SPS and trade unions had officially renounced the class struggle and accepted a peace agreement including the renunciation of strikes and assent to national defence.

At the beginning of the 1950s, there were indications that the SPS was prepared to go into opposition after it temporarily left the National Council. Then, at the height of the Cold War in 1959, all major parties agreed to permit the Social Democrats two permanent seats in the National Council. The basis for this all-party coalition was postwar prosperity, which made it possible to tie the working class to the state through reforms and concessions.

In an analysis of the coming into being of concordance-democracy, the historian Martin Pfister (Department for Contemporary History of Freiburg University) wrote: “It is remarkable that the election of two SPS-members to the National Council did not lead to a shift to the left within the executive system.” Referring to its economical foundations, he wrote: “The possibilities to redistribute wealth which still existed as the economy continued to expand after the Second World War created favourable conditions for the development of concordance.” He also sketched the actual function of this permanent coalition: “The complex network of concordance prevented...the Social Democrats and trade unions from publicly taking up conflicts of interest... The absence, or weakening, of an opposition with the power to correct policy impeded democratic processes.”

It is not surprising that the turnout for elections in Switzerland has been steadily declining under conditions where the composition of the National Council is determined before elections even took place, where not a single minister of the Council has ever been voted out of office, and thus the parliamentary elections have had no influence on the formation of government. In the last 20 years, the turnout for parliamentary elections in Switzerland was always less than 50 percent, lower than in every other European country.

However, in the last 15 years, the economic basis for this system of continuous class compromise has become increasingly threadbare. Unemployment, which had been under 1 percent for decades, rose rapidly in the 1990s. Last year alone, it rose from 2.3 percent to 3.7 percent. Those most affected are elderly women, single parents, disabled people and young people seeking work for the first time. This summer, the National Council decided to tighten up its budget with a “relief programme” that is to save 3.3 billion Swiss francs within three years at the expense of

pensioners, refugees, handicapped people, and others.

While the Social Democrats always lent their support to political compromise, the right wing of the bourgeoisie is now threatening to revoke such “concordance” in order to push official politics to the right. The SVP is threatening to go into opposition if the members of parliament don’t elect Christoph Blocher to the National Council on December 10.

The SVP is the successor organisation to the conservative-national Peasants, Trade and Citizens Party. It has a programme comprising xenophobia (“against the swamping of Switzerland by foreigners”), isolationism (“against membership in the EU”), and demands for liberalism on economic questions (“less taxes, less state interference”).

It has especially large support among small farmers—in rural areas, 40 percent voted for the SVP, as did pensioners and so-called “ordinary people,” including workers. In a demagogical manner, the SVP connects demands opposing the euro and military interventions in foreign countries—appealing to legitimate anxieties in the population—with authoritarian, chauvinistic and xenophobic law-and-order policies.

At the same time, the SVP represents definite economic interests, and because of this it is increasingly gaining votes from businessmen and self-employed people. Its propaganda organisation AUNS (Action for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland) is financed by large donations from industrialists. In its programme, it demands the reduction of taxes, deregulation and less state interference, while demagogically claiming that high taxes are responsible for cuts in social services. On the one hand, the party officially denounces any kind of opening toward the European Union as being “interference from outside” and a “sell out of the homeland.” On the other hand, Blocher himself is a billionaire industrialist who depends on the global market; he has already discretely agreed that, as a member of the National Council, he will stick to the rules and not sabotage any decision allowing Switzerland to become a member of the European Union.

The SVP gained many votes from people who had previously voted for the liberal FDP. At the same time, many representatives of the FDP openly collaborate with the SVP; during the elections, there were even joint SVP-FDP candidates. Many representatives have no problems with Blocher becoming a member of the National Council. On November 2, several leading members of the FDP gave a statement to the press emphasizing their support for Blocher’s candidacy. One of them, Felix Gutzwiller, explained in an interview with the weekly paper *Sonntagszeitung* that the FDP thinks no government is possible without the participation of the SVP, and if the SVP is “banned” from the National Council the FDP may also go into opposition.

A commentary in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* stated that Blocher’s election to the National Council could be “a chance to jolt the economy.” The results of the election are not as “epochal” as many commentaries picture it to be. The “expected adaptation of the magic formula to the new set of relations raises hopes—not least of all, economic ones. Are they justified? Will Switzerland be jolted into liberal renewal after December 10? And will the stubborn lethargy regarding economic growth be overcome at last?”

The author G.S. claims that the SVP has “recognized the mood of the times with regard to financial and taxation policies” and demands that Blocher take over the ministry of finance. He goes on to write that if empty seats within FDP and SVP are occupied by “strong personalities,” this committee would gain in “leadership and economic competence.” Finally, he writes that there is “a chance that if Christoph Blocher is integrated and given responsibility, Switzerland will have more freedom, more market and less state. More growth and prosperity would be the result.”

Although everything points to the fact that official politics in Switzerland is moving sharply to the right—a trend openly welcomed by bourgeois commentators—Swiss Social Democrats and Greens are under the illusion they could counter the SVP with the help of conservative bourgeois parties. The weekly paper *Wochezeitung*, which is associated with the left wing of the Social Democrats, wrote of a possible scenario in which a “centre/left-wing” coalition without the SVP would carry out socially conscious tax policies: “The SP and the Greens could consolidate their power: Regarding the election results, they should take the seat of Samuel Schmid... [Schmid represents the SVP in the National Council] A new Switzerland could begin with a centre/left-wing government. How many votes would the SVP gain as an opposition party? If the whole of Switzerland is taken into account, 35 percent would be the maximum. Not enough to bring down a government... The vote on 4 billion francs of senseless tax benefits (two thirds will only benefit the richest 7 percent) is the first chance to stop the SVP and their vassals.”

The Greens also expressed their support for such a centre/left-wing coalition government and announced that they put up candidates for the National Council on the basis of this perspective. Meanwhile, the daily press is speculating that parliament might vote the two Social-Democratic ministers out of the National Council. The daily newspaper *Tagesanzeiger* reported that “among bourgeois members of parliament, there are some that prefer this variant.”

The elections have shown that the social basis for concordance-democracy is crumbling and that the continuation of consensus politics is increasingly being challenged. Under conditions of growing crisis, right-wing forces are preparing themselves for more aggressive and extensive attacks on the working class, while the so-called left parties are gripped by cowardice and wishful thinking. The recent election results are a distorted expression of the huge polarisation between social classes in Switzerland, under conditions where none of the existing parties represent the working class.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**