

Swiss elections witness turn to the right and growing polarisation

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The Swiss People's Party (SVP), led by right-wing populist Christoph Blocher, emerged as the winner of parliamentary elections held on Sunday. With 29 percent of the vote, the SVP obtained the best result by a Swiss party since 1919. It increased its share of the vote by 2.3 percent and is now represented in the 200-seat National Council with 62 deputies where it formerly had 55.

The biggest defeat in the election was suffered by the Social Democratic party (SP), which lost 3.8 percent points and nine national council seats, recording less than 20 percent of the vote. The Swiss Green Party, the only large party without representation in the seven-strong National Council, was partly able to profit from the low showing of the SP. It obtained 9.6 percent and now has more than 20 deputies in the national council (formerly it had 13 delegates).

The Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), once a leading party of the Swiss bourgeoisie, continued to lose votes, and with 31 national council seats, now has the same representation as the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), which slightly increased its share. The FDP and CVP together now have the same size representation in parliament as the SVP.

Barely half the 4.9 million voters turned out to vote, but this figure represented an increase with respect to Switzerland. In previous elections, the turnout was regularly under 45 percent.

The SVP had carried out an aggressive election campaign, based on open xenophobia and opposition to the European Union, while demanding a lowering of taxes and public expenditure. The party invested huge sums in its election campaign, while giving no information about the source or extent of donations. According to the head of the Social Democrats, Hans Jürg Fehr, the SVP spent around 15 million Swiss

francs in its election campaign compared to the 1 million expended by the SP.

The success of the SVP cannot be explained, however, merely on the basis of its financial support. The party's biggest asset is the weakness of all other parties, in particular the Social Democrats, who since 1959 have consistently formed part of a coalition government with the three main bourgeois parties—the FDP, CVP and SVP— and have publicly backed their policies.

This so-called “concordance democracy” meant that all important political decisions were arrived at by small influential circles, while representatives of the Swiss banks and major concerns pulled the strings in the background. Opposition tendencies and social protest were able to find no real outlet for political expression.

The leading figure of the SVP, Christoph Blocher, has used these conditions to divert the increasing social tensions and anxieties in Switzerland in a xenophobic direction. This multibillionaire, who enjoys close relations with the banking world, poses as the advocate of the man on the street and is determined to defend an illusory harmonious Switzerland by barricading its borders and implementing drastic penal laws against so-called “foreign criminals.” Although Blocher sat in the government for the past four years as a justice minister, he conducted himself in the election campaign as if he were the leader of an opposition party.

The Social Democrats are far too imbedded in the ruling establishment to be able to put up any effective opposition to such a right-wing demagogue. They conducted an election campaign against Blocher but lacked the courage to quit their coalition with him in government and break up the concordance system. Such a step could have encouraged the development of

a popular left-wing movement—a scenario the Social Democrats seek to avoid at all costs.

Some Social Democrats even adapted to the demagoguery of the SVP—e.g., Chantal Galladé, the social-democratic candidate for the council in Zurich, demanded harsher measures against youth convicted of criminal offences.

Even the right-wing-inclined *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* was forced to concede: “The [social-democratic] party was long regarded as the social conscience of Switzerland—one has detected precious little of this responsibility in the course of the election campaign.”

And the German *Spiegel* concluded: “Blocher and his party are so successful, because they set the agenda. And because their opponents have no way of opposing them. Their strength is the weakness of the others. The same pattern is continuously repeated: the opposition castigates the demands and the style of the SVP, but have nothing to offer by way of an alternative.”

Despite all of its populist demagoguery, the SVP is well aware of the importance of the concordance system for maintaining the stranglehold of power by the country’s ruling elite. As the election result was announced, SVP President Ueli Maurer expressly repudiated rumours that his party would form a centre-right government without the participation of the Social Democrats. “We are committed to the concordance,” he said. “There is no other way to govern Switzerland.”

The SVP wants to use its increased influence, however, in order to ensure a turn to the right by the government with the new election of the Upper House of parliament on December 12. It warned the other parties it was prepared to quit the government and go into opposition if its proposed SVP candidate for the Upper House fails to be elected.

Normally, the members of the Upper House remain in parliament until they voluntarily decide to resign. Now, the FDP president, Fulvio Pelli, who is close to the SVP, has suggested the three councilors with the longest record of service should resign in order to enable the government to be restructured. The three councilors are the Free Democrat Pascal Couchepin, the Social Democrat Moritz Leuenberger and the SVP deputy Samuel Schmid, who is regarded to be an internal party rival of Blocher. Blocher evidently sees an opportunity to put in a loyal replacement and at the same time take control of a more significant ministry,

possible the Interior Ministry.

In the meantime the Greens have also indicated their interest in a seat in the government. A delegate conference is to convene on December 1 to discuss “if and under what conditions” the party will put up candidates for the Upper House of parliament.

The Greens picked up votes in the election because they are the only large party not involved in the government and because they were most vocal in their opposition to Blocher’s xenophobic demagoguery. In some cities, such as Zurich and Winterthur, they emerged as the third biggest party behind the SP and SVP. But as soon as they have won influence, the Greens have immediately sought to integrate themselves into the concordance system, a conspiracy of established parties that has continually nipped any new political initiative in the bud.

The Greens want to be part of a four-party coalition that excludes the SVP, and to this end are seeking to hold talks with the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats and Free Democrats. But these parties are unlikely to be prepared to relegate the SVP into opposition. Above all the FDP—but also the CVP—cooperates closely on economic and financial policy with the SVP and shares a common standpoint on economic issues. The FDP even appeared on some common lists with the SVP in the election campaign.

Despite the efforts of all Swiss parties—from the Greens and the Social Democrats on the left and the SVP on the right—to retain the concordance system, the latest elections show that the Alpine republic is no longer able to shield itself from the social and political tensions that are emerging all over the world. The grotesque spectacle of multibillionaire Blocher seeking to propagate the values of a picture postcard Switzerland—replete with cow bells, Swiss flags and alpine horns—is a distorted expression of this fact.



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