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The 2019 Swiss federal elections: The rise of the Green tide

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Abstract

The Greens made spectacular gains in the 2019 Swiss federal elections. In a campaign that was dominated by the climate change issue, the party outperformed the Christian Democrats to become the fourth largest party in the lower house. This status enabled the Greens to legitimately request a seat in government (the Federal Council). However, their attempt to unseat a member of the Liberals in the government, failed due to the resistance of the right-wing parties. Hence, the Green wave was not strong enough to change the composition of the federal government.

Keywords: Switzerland; election; Greens; climate change; parties

Background to the election

In 2015, the radical right Swiss People's Party (SVP) won the federal elections and managed to add a second representative to the seven-member cabinet of the Federal Council (Bernhard 2016), thereby restoring the so-called 'magic formula'. This formula reflects an unwritten rule dating from 1959 that grants each of the three largest parties of the lower house (currently the SVP, the Social Democrats (SP), and the Liberals (FDP)) with two seats in government, and the fourth largest party (i.e. the Christian Democrats (CVP)) with one seat. As was the case four years ago, the partisan composition of the Federal Council turned out to be the single most important question of the 2019 federal elections. Indeed, since the beginning of the election year polls, showed that the Greens (GPS) could overtake the CVP, thereby becoming the fourth largest party. Such an outcome was expected to trigger a lively debate about the GPS' participation in government.

Even though the 2015 federal election was characterised by a turn to the right, the following 50th legislative term of the Federal Assembly proved rather disappointing for the SVP. In Parliament it failed to enact major reforms together with the parties from the moderate right. One exception concerned a neoliberal corporate tax reform. However, citizens followed the recommendation of the left by rejecting this ambitious proposal in a referendum that took place in February 2017. As to the implementation of the SVP's popular initiative, 'against mass immigration', which citizens accepted in 2014, Parliament eventually decided to rely on a soft implementation approach. To the SVP's outrage, a majority in both chambers refrained from introducing immigration quotas (as demanded by the initiative). This outcome was chosen in order to preserve the bilateral agreements with the European Union, given that one of these agreements include the reciprocal free movement of persons.

Unlike in previous legislative terms, the SVP did not fare well in referendums and

initiatives during the last four years. The party launched a referendum challenge against a package of measures that aimed to progressively withdraw from the use of nuclear energy. However, citizens supported the first step that these measures proposed towards an energy transition at the ballots in May 2017. As far as the radical right's core issues are concerned, the SVP also suffered two major setbacks regarding its own popular initiatives. In February 2016, citizens rejected a so-called 'enforcement initiative' that dealt with the deportation of foreign criminals. Similarly, in November 2018, citizens defeated a proposition called 'self-determination', which demanded that Swiss law prevail over international law.

In terms of reforms, the overall record was rather modest. After that an encompassing pension reform had been rejected at the polls in September 2017, Parliament hammered out a revised corporate tax reform that also contained some additional revenues to the old-age pension scheme, however. Given that citizens accepted this package in May 2019, the linking of these two unrelated issues (i.e. corporate taxes and pensions) can be regarded as an ultimately successful attempt by the moderate right and the moderate left to resolve two urgent problems.

The 50th legislative term took place against the backdrop of a growing economy. This led to lower unemployment rates and rising budget surpluses. Furthermore, the salience of the asylum issue declined, as the number of asylum seekers steadily decreased. Compared to the peak number of applications in 2015, the number of newly submitted applications dropped to less than a third in 2019. The absence of major economic and immigration-related challenges probably contributed to setting the stage for the climate change issue, which dominated the campaign.

The campaign

The electoral campaign, which approximately started at the end of August, turned out to be comparatively low-key, even by Swiss standards. Many pundits characterised it as dull. They

explained the lack of intense debate about policies by the fact that parties focused on mobilising their respective constituencies. To that end, parties and candidates placed a strong emphasis on microtargeting, notably by relying on door-to-door canvassing and telephone marketing. They also invested much more in digital campaigning than in previous years. This strategy came at the expense of more traditional paid media strategies, such as billboards and newspaper ads.

Whereas the topic of asylum was salient in the previous federal elections, this year's campaign was dominated by the debate on global climate change. It needs to be highlighted that this issue made the headlines well before the beginning of the federal election campaign. In fact, the extraordinarily dry and hot summer of 2018 raised serious concerns among the population about the effects of climate change. Since the end of 2018, Switzerland witnessed an unprecedented mobilisation over climate change. Inspired by Greta Thunberg, a Swedish climate activist, school children and younger adults staged numerous events, such as student strikes, across the country. In addition, several climate rallies took place on Saturdays. On 28 September, three weeks before the elections, more than 60,000 people demonstrated in Berne's city centre, according to the organisers, an alliance of civil society organisations for climate protection.

The campaign otherwise lacked events that generated pronounced media attention. Two months ahead of the elections, the SVP unveiled a poster that showed a red apple with a Swiss flag being eaten by worms wearing the colours of the four other main parties as well as those of the European Union. This provocation caused some indignation among the SVP's competitors and was interpreted as a desperate attempt by the radical right party to put a controversial and currently stalled institutional agreement between the European Union and Switzerland at the centre of the political debate. The SVP immediately received increased media attention. However, the effect of this campaign poster evaporated after only a week.

A second controversy in the campaign revolved around the CVP's internet campaign,

4

which criticised the positions of candidates from other parties and promoted its own. In addition to allegations of negative campaigning, the most disputed aspect of this campaign concerned the misleading of citizens. Internet users who typed the names of more than 2,500 candidates into Google's search engine were shown ads of websites that were in fact hosted by the CVP and not by the candidates themselves (as the websites' addresses suggested).

-- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE --

Results

Elections to the National Council

By Swiss standards, the elections to the National Council, which took place on 20 October, were characterized by major shifts. While the GPS and the GLP made spectacular gains, the four government parties (SVP, SP, FDP and CVP) all lost ground. As Table 1 shows, the SVP suffered the largest losses. Its vote share decreased from 29.4 per cent to 25.6 per cent and its number of seats from 65 to 53. This 12-seat loss set a new record of losses since the introduction of proportional representation in 1919. The SVP nevertheless managed to remain Switzerland's largest party by far. In addition, it confirmed its status as the strongest radical right party in Western Europe based on the lower house elections performance.

The SP remained Switzerland's second largest party, but it experienced a serious setback. With a vote share of 16.8 per cent (-2.0 per cent), the SP recorded its worst result in more than 100 years. This poor performance translated into a loss of four representatives in the National Council. Some weeks after the elections, Christian Levrat announced his resignation as party leader.

Election Day also turned out to be disappointing for the Liberals. The FDP hoped that it

could repeat its turnaround from four years ago. However, the party suffered a defeat in the National Council, where it lost four seats. Most strikingly, its vote share reached its all-time low (15.1 per cent). Pundits wondered whether the Liberals' bad performance was due to a shift towards a more pro-environmental position the party decided upon in spring after a survey of their members.

The Christian Democrats attracted 11.4 per cent (-0.6 per cent) of the vote and lost three representatives. The party was obviously not able to reverse its downward trend that began almost forty years ago. Even worse, the CVP ranked fifth for the first time ever, thereby placing it in a position that called its participation in government into question.

In contrast, the Greens had a lot to celebrate. Indeed, the GPS increased its vote share by 6.1 per cent to reach 13.2 per cent. For the first time in its history, the party managed to reach a double-digit figure. Its number of National Councillors went up from 11 to 28. This 17-seat increase was the largest gain of any Swiss party under proportional representation. Pundits agreed that the GPS was able to take full advantage of the salient climate change issue that dominated the campaign.

The same holds true for the more centrist Green Liberals. The GLP succeeded in gaining considerable ground in terms of both vote share (+3.2 per cent) and seats (+9). This allowed the party to consolidate its status as Switzerland's sixth largest party thanks to a vote share of 7.8 per cent and 16 MPs.

In contrast, the Conservative Democrats from the moderate right experienced dramatic losses. The BDP, which was founded in 2008 after a quarrel within the SVP, cannot longer be considered a relevant party at the federal level. With a vote share of 2.4 per cent (-1.7 per cent), it only has 3 MPs (-4) in its ranks, an insufficient number to form a parliamentary group. The BDP's MPs joined the CVP's parliamentary group, which includes the MPs of the moderate

Evangelicals of the EVP as well.

As far as the remaining parties are concerned, the EVP increased their representation from two to three MPs. The tally of the radical left went up from one to two, as Solidarity won a seat, and the incumbent from the Swiss Party of Labour managed to get re-elected. After an absence of eight years, the conservative Evangelicals from the EDU regained their representation by obtaining one seat. Finally, both the Ticino League (Lega) and the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG), two regional radical right parties, suffered heavy losses. While the former had to surrender one of its two seats, the latter's only MP was voted out.

Turnout only reached 45.1 per cent. This represents a decline of 3.4 per cent when compared to the 2015 elections to the National Council. Observers of Swiss politics expected a much higher participation rate since many young voters showed great interest in the intense debate on climate change.

According to an online post-electoral survey commissioned by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (Hermann et al. 2019), the climate issue proved to be the most important vote decision factor. Indeed, 25 per cent of the citizens that participated in the elections indicated that this issue was relevant for their choice. This share turned out to be even higher for those who voted for the GPS (78 per cent) and the GLP (63 per cent). In addition, these two environmentally-focused parties drew a great deal of support from the youth. Among voters aged between 18 and 25 years, 21 per cent voted for the GPS and 14 per cent for the GLP.

 The analysis of voter flows (Herrmann et al. 2019) revealed that the two environmental parties primarily benefited from mobilising voters. Both the GPS and the GLP heavily attracted previous non-voters. Twenty-eight per cent of those who voted for the GPS and 26 per cent of those who voted for the GLP did not participate in the 2015 elections. In contrast, there were fewer gains from swing voters. The only notable shifts went from the SP to the GPS (8 per cent

7

of their electorate) and from the FDP to the GLP (also 8 per cent). Finally, the five largest parties

that lost ground (the SVP, SP, FDP, CVP and BDP) suffered from a loss of voters who did not

take part in these elections in contrast to the previous ones.

At the level of political camps, the elections to the National Council displayed a 'left

slide', as the media called it. In terms of seat shares, the SP, the GPS, and the radical left

managed to increase their cumulative representation by 7 to 34.5 per cent. The gains of the left

were mainly at the expense of the radical right (-6.5 per cent). The SVP's parliamentary group

(SVP as well as Lega and EDU) currently forms 27.5 per cent of the National Council. Finally,

the moderate parties (FDP, CVP, GLP, BDP, and EVP) remained stable with a seat share of 38

per cent (-0.5 per cent). Given that the left and the radical right are diametrically opposed to each

other on most disputed issues, the moderate parties have the power to influence either centre-left

or centre-right coalitions. As to the former, it is noteworthy that the radical right is no longer able

to reach a majority by only siding with the FDP since these parties now hold 84 seats (as opposed

to the 101 seats they held during the previous legislative term). Hence, observers of Swiss politics

agree that the CVP will probably regain its traditional pivotal position in the next four years.

Another major development was the increased representation of women. Never had so

many women been elected to the lower house. The share of female MPs went up from 32 to 42

per cent. This boost was fuelled by a so-called 'women's strike' on 14 June, when hundreds of

thousands took to the streets to call for more equal rights. In addition, a countrywide feminist

campaign (*Helvetia calling*) urged parties to put a maximum number of women in promising

positions for the federal elections. In this context, it is worth noting that women accounted for a

majority of newly elected MPs (53 per cent) to the National Council. However, their share in the

lower house varies widely according to parliamentary groups. Whereas the GPS (60 per cent), the

SP (59 per cent) and the GLP (50 per cent) managed to achieve gender equality, the FDP (38 per

cent), the CVP (29 per cent), and the SVP (25 per cent) are still a long way from this symbolic threshold.

Elections to the Council of States

Given that the two chambers of the Swiss Parliament have equal power, the elections to the upper house (which represents the country's 26 cantons) are also important, even though they use to receive far less media attention than the elections to the lower house. At the level of political camps, the 2019 elections to the Council of States were characterised by a great amount of stability. The moderate right maintained its majority with a seat share of 54.3 per cent, although it lost some ground (-4.4 per cent). These losses equally benefited the left (30.4 per cent) and the radical right (15.2 per cent).

The right-hand area of Table 1 indicates the number of seats that the various parties obtained in 2015 and 2019. It shows that the two major parties from the moderate right continue to dominate the upper house. With 13 MPs, the CVP is the biggest party. It is followed by the FDP with 12 MPs. As has always been the case in the history of the Swiss Confederation, these two parties together hold a majority of seats. The BDP, for its part, lost its only mandate.

Substantial shifts occurred within the left. Similar to the elections to the National Council, the Greens emerged as the big winners. To the great surprise of political observers, the GPS managed to increase its tally from one to five. Three out of their four seat gains were at the expense of the SP. Altogether, the left thus gained one seat. With 14 Councillors of States, the left reached a new all-time high number of representatives. As was the case in the previous legislative term, the SP and the GPS are jointly able to form a majority with either the CVP or the FDP.

The SVP, for its part, increased its representation by one seat. Including an independent,

its parliamentary group now has seven MPs. While the SVP is the largest party in the National Council, it still only ranks fourth in the Council of States. This is mainly due to the fact that most elections to the upper house are organised under majoritarian rules. SVP candidates often face difficulty mobilising beyond their own voter base.

Finally, the number of women in the Council of States increased markedly from seven to 12. This was remarkable given that only one female incumbent stood for re-election. However, the 26 per cent of women in the Council of States is still much lower than the 42 per cent of women in the National Council.

Elections to the Federal Council

On Election Day, Regula Rytz, the president of the Greens, refrained from making a clear announcement about a government participation of her party. She simply declared that people wanted more ecological policies and that this result of the elections should be reflected in the Federal Council. These half-hearted statements were due to the fact that no cabinet member resigned at the end of the legislative term. This meant that the GPS had to remove a sitting Federal Councillor from office. However, this goes against Swiss political traditions. The unseating of an incumbent minister only happens under exceptional circumstances. This has only been the case four times thus far in the history of the Swiss Confederation (see Church (2004) and Church (2008) for the most recent two incidences).

The Greens nevertheless decided to claim a seat in the Federal Council. On 22 November, they announced that Ms. Rytz would attack Ignazio Cassis from the FDP. The GPS argued that, in light of the election results, the latter were overrepresented in government. In fact, the GPS aimed to put an end to the majority held by the FDP and SVP in the cabinet. This explains why the Greens did not target the seat of the more moderate CVP. Indeed, under the 'magic formula',

which refers to the vote shares of the elections to the National Council, the GPS should have demanded the CVP's seat.

However, the CVP and the remaining parties from the right quickly spoke out against the GPS' government participation. Even though they acknowledged that there was some legitimacy to this demand, they refused to vote an incumbent government member out of office and least of all Mr. Cassis, a representative of the Italian-speaking minority. In addition, politicians from the right emphasised that partisan changes in the composition of the Federal Council had in the past always occurred with a time lag. In this context, many stated that the Greens would have to confirm their electoral performance in four years in order to obtain a seat in government. Of the six parliamentary groups, Ms. Rytz's candidacy was eventually only supported by the GPS and the SP. For its part, the GLP was cross-pressured between the pros and cons of electing the GPS candidate to the Federal Council at the expense of the FDP. It eventually refrained from issuing a voting recommendation.

The elections to the Federal Council took place via a secret ballot on 11 December. The 246 MPs from both chambers were entitled to vote. As had been widely expected, the seven cabinet members were re-elected. Ueli Maurer (SVP), Simonetta Sommaruga (SP), Alain Berset (SP), Guy Parmelin (SVP), Ignazio Cassis (FDP), Viola Amherd (CVP), and Karin Keller-Sutter (FDP) were all comfortably confirmed in the first round of voting. Due to the GPS' challenger candidate, it was not surprising that the re-election of Mr. Cassis was the most disputed one. However, Ms. Rytz's attack clearly failed. She only received 82 votes, thus failing to win enough support beyond the left to unseat the current foreign minister who managed to win 145 votes.

The Greens maintained that they still considered themselves to be entitled to participate in government. Hence, it can be expected that the party will nominate candidates when presented with the opportunity of replacement elections that may occur during the legislative term due to

resignations, and especially in the case of vacancies of cabinet members from the FDP and the CVP.

Conclusion

The 2019 Swiss federal elections resulted in a resounding victory for the Greens. Thanks to a campaign that was dominated by the climate change issue, the party gained much ground in both chambers of Parliament. In the lower house, the Greens outperformed the Christian Democrats to become the fourth largest party for the first time in the party's history. This status enabled the Greens to legitimately request a seat in government. However, the green wave was not strong enough to change the composition of the Federal Council. The Greens' attempt to unseat a member of the Liberals in the seven-member cabinet failed in Parliament. To enter government, the GPS will probably have to once again repeat its remarkable electoral performance in 2023. Nonetheless, this will be no easy task, as it cannot take for granted that environmental issues will be as salient as during that year's election campaign.

In terms of policies, the environmentally-minded parties (especially the Greens, the Social Democrats, and the Green Liberals) will have a strong position in Parliament to push through some of their demands in the next legislative term. A tightening of the CO^2 Act is already underway. However, the SVP has already threatened to launch a referendum challenge. This suggests that in Switzerland's direct democracy, ambitious environmental reform projects must ultimately prevail at the ballot box. Given that the effective implementation of climate protection goals often requires higher costs, it can be anticipated that such measures will be discussed controversially among citizens in a near future.

A major characteristic of the elections to the National Council was the weak performance of the four government parties. While the SVP suffered an unambiguous defeat, the Social

Democrats, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats recorded their worst results since the end of World War II. Declining electoral support for these traditional parties parallels recent election outcomes in Western Europe (Faas and Klingelhöfer 2019; Garzia 2019). In the case of Switzerland, however, the question of whether this will remain a steady trend remains open. It is quite conceivable that the SVP, SP, and FDP will be able to recover from their electoral defeats as soon as their respective core issues come to the fore again. Things may be somewhat different for the Christian Democrats. Its traditional base, rooted in Catholic conservatism, is dying and the party faces great difficulties to develop a clear profile. It would therefore not be surprising if the party would suffer further defeats in the upcoming elections.

The weakening of the CVP would keep the current debate about the appropriate government composition alive. In any case, it seems unlikely that the current 'magic formula' will last much longer. Since its implementation in 1959, the electorate has never been as poorly represented in government. The fact that non-government parties currently account for 31 per cent of the vote share in the lower house challenges the principle of *concordance*, according to which the strongest parties are represented in government. This raises the question of how the unique Swiss government system will react to future electoral outcomes.

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Table 1: Results of the 2019 Swiss federal elections

| | National Council (Lower House) | | | | Council of States (Upper House) | |
| | 2015 | | 2019 | | 2015 | 2019 |
	Seats	Votes %	Seats	Votes %	Seats	Seats
Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC) [a]	65	29.4	53	25.6	6	7
Social Democrats (SP/PS)	43	18.8	39	16.8	12	9
Liberals (FDP/PLR)	33	16.4	29	15.1	13	12
Greens (GPS/PES)	11	7.1	28	13.2	1	5
Christian Democrats (CVP/PDC/PPD) [b]	28	12.0	25	11.4	13	13
Green Liberals (GLP/PVL)	7	4.6	16	7.8		
Conservative Democrats (BDP/PBD)	7	4.1	3	2.4	1	0
Evangelicals (EVP/PEV)	2	1.9	3	2.1		
Radical left [c]	1	1.2	2	1.4		
Federal Democrats (EDU/UDF)	0	1.2	1	1.0		
Ticino League (Lega)	2	1.0	1	0.8		
Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG)	1	0.3	0	0.2		
Others	0	2.0	0	2.2		
	200	100	200	100	46	46
Turnout		48.4		45.1		

[a] The Swiss People's Party in the Council of States includes an independent who is member of its parliamentary group.

[b] For the 2015 elections to the National Council, the Christian Democrats include the Social Christians of Obwalden who obtained a seat and a vote share of 0.4%.

[c] The radical left includes the Swiss Party of Labour, Solidarity as well as the Alternatives.

Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office