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12 Switzerland

When opposition is in government

Jan Rosset, Andrea Pilotti and Yannis Papadopoulos

Introduction

Switzerland has been considered the prototypical example of the consensus model of democracy (Lijphart 1984: 23–32). Among the 21 Western democracies analysed by Lijphart, Switzerland is the only one whose government has been composed uninterruptedly since 1945 by a large coalition (Liberals, Christian Democrats, Agrarians and Socialists). It has been argued that parliamentary opposition – at least in the way it is understood in Westminster democracies – does not exist in Switzerland (Church and Vatter 2009). Indeed, with all major parties being part of the governmental coalition, an upfront or systematic confrontation between these parties and government is simply not a viable option. This does not mean, however, that voices that are not in line with government are absolutely silent, and the level of confrontation in Swiss politics has been on the rise. A recent special issue of the *Swiss Political Science Review* (21, no. 4: December 2015) is significantly entitled "Consensus Lost? Disenchanted Democracy in Switzerland", and Vatter (2016) showed that the Swiss "consociational" model is subject to centrifugal trends: while Switzerland continues to display elements of power sharing in the polity, a polarising and competitive trend can be observed now in politics and policymaking.

Multiple institutional channels in Switzerland, within or outside the parliament (i.e. through direct democracy), allow political actors to express their divergent views and hold the government accountable on specific issues (Papadopoulos 1994: 114–115). The aim of this chapter is to assess the evolution of the use of some of these channels through an analysis of parliamentary bills, voting behaviour of parliamentarians and direct democratic votes during the 1999–2011 period. The need for such an assessment is linked to the changes that were initiated in the 1990s and have progressively altered opposition activity in Switzerland. These changes mainly concern two (partially interconnected) trends: on the one hand, an evolution in the functioning of parliament and its relationship with the government and, on the other hand, shifts in electoral politics, in terms of both the relative strength of political parties and the way political campaigns are conducted.

The Swiss Parliament has historically been characterised by its weakness in the decision-making process (for more information, see Papadopoulos 1997; Kriesi 1998; Linder and Mueller 2017), especially for three reasons:

- The *ex post* "Sword of Damocles" of the referendum on parliamentary decisions, which casts a permanent shadow of popular rejection on them;
- A sophisticated pre-parliamentary phase, in which especially corporatist actors used to strike compromises that were formally ratified subsequently by the parliament;
- The weak degree of professionalisation of MPs, who often occupy their parliamentary charge part-time.

Nevertheless, also as a consequence of an important process of adaptation of Swiss legislation to European legislation (Mach 1999, 2006), which led to a complexification of issues to be treated, the Federal Assembly adopted in the 1990s parliamentary reforms that aimed at reasserting the political status of the parliament and at professionalising its members. These reforms included the creation of standing committees in the early 1990s (Lüthi 1997; Jegher 1999) and the increase of parliamentary allowances, which boosted the number of MPs working full-time for their political mandate (Pilotti 2017).[1] All in all, these reforms have strengthened the parliament. As such, they have made parliamentary opposition potentially less costly and more effective, at least in theory.

The second evolution concerns political parties, their organisation, their relative electoral success, and their campaign strategy. A specificity of the Swiss case is that the government–opposition divide is not clear-cut and rather issue specific: governmental parties often oppose governmental bills and non-governmental parties frequently support them. The two main opposition camps that can be identified in the last decades are led by parties that have been almost continuously part of government and can be clearly identified as mainstream parties: the Socialists (SPS) on the left side of the political spectrum and more recently the Swiss People's Party (SVP) too, situated at the other extreme of the party system (see Table 12.1 for a list of Swiss parties and their characteristics).

For a long time, there has been little variation in the electoral shares obtained by the major political parties. The seat share of the four major political parties – the Liberal Party (FDP), the Christian-Democratic Party (CVP), the Socialist Party (SPS) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) – did not change significantly between 1945 and the early 1990s. However, since the 1990s there has been an important change with the electoral successes of the Swiss People's Party and the weakening of the Liberals and Christian Democrats. The balance of power between the main parties has thus changed quite substantially, especially within the so-called bourgeois bloc of right-wing parties, to the benefit of the increasingly oppositional SVP. Between 1991 and 2015 the SVP has

Table 12.1 Political parties in the Swiss parliament (1999–2011)

Name abbreviation	*National language name*	*English name*	*Party family*	*First entry into parliament*	*Party stability (electoral support range)*	*Experience in government*
SVP	Schweizerische Volkspartei	Swiss People's Party	Agrarian	1971	22,6–28,9	In and out of government
SPS	Sozialdemokratisch Partei der Schweiz	Social Democratic Party of Switzerland	Social Democrat	1890	19,5–23,3	Always in government
FDP	FDP. Die Liberalen	Free Democratic Party of Switzerland	Liberal Party	1848	15,8–19,9	Always in government
CVP	Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei	Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland	Christian Party	1848	14,4–15,8	Always in government
GPS	Die Grünen – Grüne Partei der Schweiz	Green Party of Switzerland	Green	1979	5,0–9,8	Never in government
LPS	Liberale Partei der Schweiz	Liberal Party of Switzerland	Liberal Party	1913	1,8–2,3 (merged with FDP in 2009)	Never in government
BDP	Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei	Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland	Conservative	2008	Did not run in the period under consideration	In and out of government
GLP	Grünliberale Partei	Green Liberal Party of Switzerland	Green	2007	0–1,4	Never in government
EVP	Evangelische Volkspartei der Schweiz	Evangelical People's Party of Switzerland	Christian Party	1919	1,8–2,4	Never in government
EDU	Eidgenössisch-Demokratische Union	Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland	Nationalist	1991	1,2–1,3	Never in government
Lega	Lega dei Ticinesi	Ticino League	Ethno-nationalist	1991	0,3–0,9	Never in government
PdA	Partei der Arbeit der Schweiz	Swiss Party of Labour	Communist	1947	0,7–1,0	Never in Government

Note: Only parties with at least two simultaneous representatives during the 1999–2003, 2003–2007 and 2007–2011 legislative periods are included. Party families are classified based on the Comparative Manifesto Project (when available). The main political "ancestor" of the SVP was the Party of Farmers, Traders and Independents, which has had MPs since 1919.

almost uninterruptedly increased its share of votes in Lower House elections, expanding its electorate from 11.9 to 29.4 per cent.

This electoral shift came hand in hand with two other trends in Swiss politics. First, the rise of the SVP is associated with an increased polarisation in the Swiss party system (Ladner 2007). In the 1970s, the party was characterised by a "governmental profile"; only in very few cases did its positions diverge from those of the government. Since the mid-1990s, the SVP has a more critical attitude towards legislative acts supported by the Federal Council (Sciarini 2007: 485–486).[2] This trend has also been observed more generally in the Swiss decision-making process with the increased level of conflict between the various actors involved (Sciarini et al. 2015). Second, beyond the policy positions of political actors, the style of doing politics has evolved over time as it has become more and more mediatised, and this has contributed to polarisation too (Landerer 2014).

This specific context of a country with no opposition tradition but with a series of changes encouraging less consensual policymaking (see Bochsler et al. 2015 for an overview) makes the analysis of variations in the magnitude of opposition in the new millennium particularly relevant. Specifically, we can expect an increase in parliamentary activity both in terms of legislation proposals and scrutiny. The level of consensus among governmental parties is also expected to have diminished over time, particularly with a decrease of government support from the SVP.

We analyse these trends making use of data coming from three different sources: the Curia Vista database of parliamentary proceedings of the Federal Assembly (i.e. both Chambers of the Swiss parliament, the National Council and the Council of States), the Smartmonitor database of votes in the Lower Chamber of the Swiss Parliament (National Council) and the Swissvotes database on direct democratic votes, all of which are accessible online (see references). Given that electronic voting in the Lower Chamber of the Swiss parliament has only been introduced in 1996, our analyses focus on the years 1999–2011, corresponding to three full legislative periods for which data was available.

Our contribution is divided into three main sections. The first one focuses on the evolution in the level of support to government bills over time. The second section is devoted to the diversification of legislative activity and to the use of different legislative instruments by political actors. The third section discusses changes in opposition patterns and precedes a more general discussion that concludes.

The opposition's behaviour in the law-making process

Characterising opposition in Switzerland is not a straightforward task, as opposition can materialise both in parliament and in direct democracy. Opposition in the legislature can take diverse forms, including voting against bills

sponsored by the government, amending these bills, or sponsoring new bills (i.e. parliamentary bills or motions). Opposition can also materialise in direct democracy, with petitions (often backed by political parties) that call for new legislation (popular initiatives) or for referendums against bills approved by the bicameral federal parliament.

In addition, Switzerland is characterised by a "collegial" government in which all major parties (CVP, FDP, SPS and SVP) have been represented almost continuously since 1943. The distribution of the seven seats between the four parties has remained unchanged for a long time since 1959.[3] The period under consideration, however, has been marked by a short-term disruption of this exceptional continuity. Indeed, in 2007, the Federal Assembly chose not to renew the mandate of the Federal Councillor Christoph Blocher, the leader of the SVP. Reflecting the consensual spirit of Swiss politics, it elected another, more moderate, SVP politician, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. She as well as Samuel Schmid, the second SVP representative in government who also used to take moderate stands, were expelled from the party to later join the ranks of a new party, the Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (BDP). At the time, the SVP declared it would rather stay outside government and be in opposition (see Church and Vatter 2009). This strategy has not been sustained, however, as SVP was back in government the following year with the election of Ueli Maurer to the Federal Council (see Table 12.2). Given that coalition patterns differ depending on the issue at stake and that all major parties are represented in government, it is impossible to identify clear opposition parties.

In a first overview of the voting behaviour of political parties, we focus specifically on the degree to which they vote against the government. In line with other works in the field (see e.g. Traber et al. 2014), our analyses are restricted to those bills that have been initiated by the Federal Council, with the idea that these bills are most comparable over time and that they are also the most relevant to study the degree of opposition to government from within the parliament.[4] The analyses on voting behaviour are restricted to final votes on the bills, as the parliamentary procedure includes a series of votes for which a favourable vote cannot be univocally interpreted as a backing of government.[5]

Table 12.2 Government and opposition composition (1999–2011)

	Prime Minister (PM's party)	*Type of government*	*Government parties*	*Opposition parties*
1999–2003	N/A	Coalition	CVP, FDP, SPS, SVP	N/A
2003–2007	N/A	Coalition	CVP, FDP, SPS, SVP	N/A
2007–2008	N/A	Coalition	BDP, CVP, FDP, SPS	N/A
2008–2009	N/A	Coalition	BDP, CVP, FDP, SPS, SVP	N/A
2009–2011	N/A	Coalition	BDP, CVP, FDP, SPS, SVP	N/A

The analyses have been carried out to show whether the degree of opposition of the five largest Swiss parties – those five that were able to form a parliamentary group without interruption during the three legislatures we study (i.e. the four major governmental parties plus the Greens) – has changed over time. In order to do that, we simply compute for each vote the share of parliamentarians from within a parliamentary group voting in line with government (i.e. voting "yea") in the final vote of a bill of governmental origin.[6] For each parliamentary group yearly means are then computed enabling us to track changes over time. Figure 12.1 shows the mean share of the members of parliamentary groups who support governmental bills. In line with previous research, we find generally a very high support for governmental bills in all parliamentary groups, including the one formed by the Greens, the only party analysed that has never been part of government. The largest support for governmental bills can be found in the moderate centre-right parliamentary groups (the group formed around the CVP and the Liberal group around the FDP).[7] In both cases average support of government bills rarely drops below 95 per cent. This might not be so surprising given the representation of each of these parties in government and the fact that their political programmes and ideology are arguably closest to the median governmental position on most issues. Governmental support among the Socialists and the Greens is also high, oscillating mostly around about 80 per cent over the time lapse. The Greens have been slightly less supportive of government in the early 2000s, but the figures for the latest years do not indicate any notable differences between the

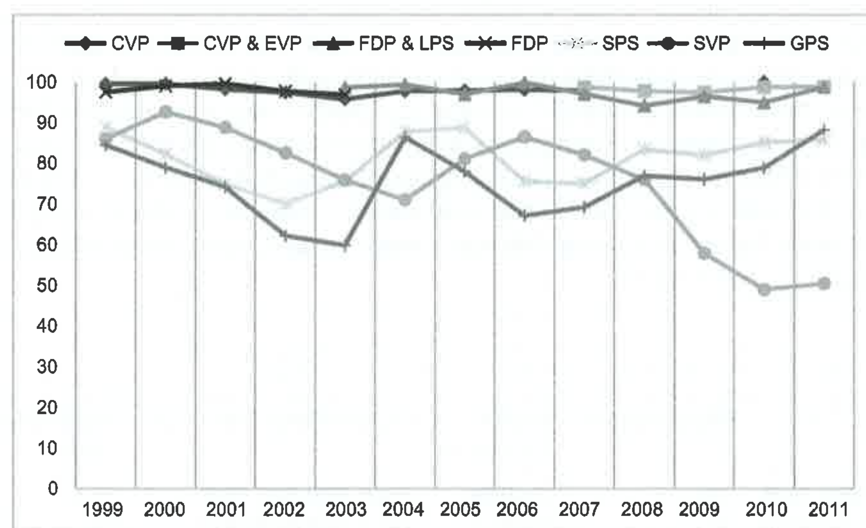

Figure 12.1 Share of favourable votes to government bills, by parliamentary group (1999–2011)

Source: Smartmonitor (faction votes, bills context and votes context datasets)

two left parties, although only the major one – the Socialists – participates in government. Finally, in contrast to the stability that can be observed for the four above-mentioned parties, the level of support of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has changed considerably since 1999. While it has been gently declining for a period of about ten years, this level of support has gone further down in much larger proportions since 2008, reaching an average of slightly less than 60 per cent since then.

This evolution is particularly interesting and could be considered unique in many respects. Indeed, SVP plays a dual role by simultaneously participating in government and behaving more and more like an opposition party. In relation to the mainstream–radical party differentiation included in other contributions to this volume, the SVP is probably a special example of a party that is mainstream as far as its continued participation in government would suggest, but whose programmatic stances can be regarded as radical in many respects.[8]

The opposition actors beyond the voting behaviour

In addition to parliamentary votes on governmental bills, parliamentary opposition may materialise in the amendments made to government bills in the parliament (usually based on a proposal made by a committee of one of the two chambers). According to Papadopoulos (1997: 103), we may hypothesise that the amplitude of amendments introduced by the Federal Assembly and consequently the degree of parliamentary opposition are a function of the degree of political conflict. In other words, "the Parliament modifies few of the executive's proposals in the consensual periods, acting in these circumstances as the 'notary of the government'. But in a period of crisis and/or when the prevailing degree of conflict is higher, the Parliament presumably exerts its legislative and controlling functions more assertively" (Sciarini 2007: 480). Studies from previous decades have shown that typically the Federal Assembly did amend about 40 per cent of the government bills it voted on (Jegher 1999).

Our analysis of government bills in the years 2006 and 2010, that is, before and after the outbreak of the global financial crisis of 2007–8, based on the Curia Vista archives shows a similar pattern. The proportion of governmental bills that were amended by the parliament was 33.3 per cent in 2006 and 46.8 per cent four years later.[9] Part of this observed difference, however, has to do with fiscal agreements with different countries. These concerned the elimination of cross-country double taxation. While all seven treaties proposed by the government in 2006 were subsequently approved without amendments by the parliament, for 10 of the 12 bills on this topic registered in 2010 a modification has been proposed in order to bring them in line with tougher existing regulations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). If we take out these specific cases in order to get more comparable figures across years, we observe an amendment rate of 36 per cent for the 2006 bills and 41 per cent for those registered four years later. In view of this and

the high proximity of these figures with the numbers reported for previous decades, we cannot conclude that there has been an increase in the share of government bills that have been amended.

However, more changes have occurred as far as the use of initiative instruments by the parliament are concerned. There are in total ten different types of parliamentary instruments according to the classification of the parliamentary services.[10] From among these types, only two are initiated from outside the Federal Assembly: the government bills and the cantonal initiative. Regarding the other types, three of them enable initiating new legislation: the parliamentary initiative, the parliamentary motion and the parliamentary postulate (see Sciarini 2007). These various forms differ in their formal requirements and in the extent to which they are binding for the government. While the postulate is relatively easy to initiate, it is not binding for the government, as is the motion. The parliamentary initiative on the other hand gives more power to the parliament over the government by leaving the lead with the Federal Assembly throughout the decision process (Sciarini 2007). The other instruments, notably the interpellations, recommendations, requests and questions to government, have a less tangible result, as they will not directly influence law making, but might serve as ways to monitor the activity of the Federal Council.

If parliamentary activity has evolved over time, we would expect a change in the number and type of interventions in parliament. In line with what we would expect from the trends in professionalisation within the parliament and the complexification of policymaking, we observe a large increase in the total number over time: while only about 1000 new actions were registered in 1999, the number was more than twice as much 12 years later. However, it is also quite clear that this "inflation" does not concern all types of instruments and that the overall increase can be attributed mainly to three categories: parliamentary motions, parliamentary interpellations and questions to government.[11] The number of motions reached 614 in 2009 (up from 227 six years earlier). Likewise, the number of parliamentary interpellations and parliamentary questions increased in similar proportions, reaching an average of 494, respectively, 605 per year in the last 3 years analysed (2009–2011). While the first type shows that the parliament indeed seeks to initiate more legislation, the latter two categories relate more closely to the scrutiny role of the parliament. There has also been an increase, albeit less spectacular, in the other types of instruments, with the exception of government bills and bills concerning the functioning of the Federal Assembly (called parliament bills), whose number has remained very stable over time. This evolution confirms that the trend for an increase of parliamentary activity over time observed since the 1990s (see e.g. Sciarini 2007) has not stopped, but rather accelerated. More generally it could be interpreted as a progressive emancipation of the parliament, even though as our following analyses will show, the direct policy impact of this evolution is more limited.

In order to disentangle the partisan sources of this increase in parliamentary activity, we turn to the analysis of parliamentary initiatives. Our focus on the parliamentary initiative is linked to the fact that it is the most powerful means in the hands of parliament to initiate new legislation.[12] In order to analyse how and especially by whom it is used, we proceeded to an analysis of all the parliamentary initiatives registered in 2006 and 2010 based on information available in the Curia Vista archive of parliamentary proceedings.

Table 12.3 reports the number of parliamentary initiatives registered by different actors and the yearly number of initiatives per MP by parliamentary group (excluding the bills initiated by committees). The number of parliamentary initiatives has been much higher in 2010 as compared with 2006 (142 and 94 respectively). In both years, less than 15 per cent of the parliamentary initiatives came from committees, which are formed by representatives of different parliamentary groups.[13] The remaining initiatives were initiated by individuals or party groups. The most notable change in both absolute and relative terms between these two years analysed is that of the number of initiatives promoted by the Swiss People's Party. While only 12 initiatives were forthcoming from members of this group in 2006, the number was almost three times higher in 2010. For the left parties, the number of bills initiated in 2010 was very similar to that in 2006. However, given the large increase in the number of bills initiated by the SVP and, to a lesser extent, by the two centre-right parties (the FDP and the CVP), the relative share of the initiatives by the Green and Socialist party groups has dropped significantly. In 2006, the two left parties taken together were initiating many more bills relative to their seat share than parties from the right-hand side of the political spectrum: with less than a third of seats in the National Council and less than a quarter

Table 12.3 Parliamentary initiatives by political actors in 2006 and 2010

Initiator	*2006*		*2010*	
	Number	*Per MP (Federal Assembly)*	*Number*	*Per MP (Federal Assembly)*
Standing committees	12	–	19	
SVP*	12	0,19	33	0,49
Socialists*	28	0,46	25	0,51
FDP*	10	0,20	20	0,43
CVP*	8	0,19	24	0,47
Greens	18	1,38	20	0,83
BDP*	–		1	0,17
Other	6	0,5	–	
TOTAL	94		142	

Source: Curia Vista.

Note: * denotes presence in government.

in the Council of States, representatives of the Socialist and Green parties were at the origin of about half of all parliamentary initiatives. However, this overrepresentation of parliamentary initiatives coming from the left is no longer true in 2010 with the two parties being at the origin of about one-third of all partisan initiatives, corresponding to their combined seat share in the National Council.

Regarding the thematic areas of these parliamentary initiatives, it is difficult to observe a clear trend. The parliamentary services categorise each parliamentary proceeding into 21 different policy areas. Based on this information, it appears that in both years, the main focus of these initiatives has been on institution-related matters with juridical, institutional matters and subjects related to the functioning of the parliament itself representing about 40 per cent of all parliamentary initiatives.

There are also some – not very marked – partisan differences in terms of thematic areas of parliamentary initiatives. For instance, the Greens initiated a substantial share of the energy, environment and social policy related bills in both years, while the Swiss People's Party emphasised issues linked to immigration in 2006 and, in 2010, those related to public finances and the economy.

While it will be interesting to observe how the trend in the expansion of the use of the parliamentary initiative will develop over time, this insight into the initiative activity of the various parliamentary groups in 2006 and 2010 indicates that the parties from the right and especially the SVP have become more active in parliament and that their use of instruments traditionally used by the Socialist and Green parties has become much more common. The direct policy consequences of these changes are likely to remain, however, relatively limited: only 17 of the total of 94 initiatives launched in 2006 resulted in new legislation by the end of 2015 (out of which 7 were initiated by committees) and for those bills initiated in 2010 for which the procedure has reached an end, only 14 were approved (a majority of which were initiated by parliamentary committees).

More generally, the increase in the level of parliamentary activity is related to two different logics. On the one hand, it reflects the progressive emancipation of the parliament as a collective body over the last years. With the trend towards the professionalisation of parliament and the various reforms carried out in the early 1990s in order to give it more power (Lüthi 2007), the Federal Assembly has certainly become a more independent and more active institution in the Swiss political system. On the other hand, this activity is likely to be linked to the increased mediatisation of Swiss politics and the awareness by political parties – especially those located at the extremes of the political spectrum – that their parliamentary activity can be used for communication purposes (see Landerer 2014). The increase of the parliamentary activity in terms of initiating new legislation from the part of the SVP is certainly consistent with that logic, but it also has to do with its increasingly oppositional position.

Coalition patterns and parties' strategies outside parliament

Beyond the behaviour of single parties and their members in parliament, at least two other factors need to be considered in order to gauge the evolution of opposition in Switzerland: the coalitions of political parties, which define who is in opposition on a given parliamentary vote, and political parties' strategy outside of parliament.

As described above, one of the specificities of the Swiss case is that opposition is not necessarily defined by the participation or not in government and may thus vary not only over time but also across topics. Given that the government is formed of a super-majority that includes parties representing around four-fifths of all votes, this means that coalition patterns within this super-majority are particularly important to understand the configuration of opposition. On some votes a specific coalition configuration means that a specific party (or coalition of parties) can be in opposition on that very vote, while on another occasion that party will endorse the government position and another party (or coalition of parties) could be then in opposition.

Figure 12.2 shows the evolution of the structure of party coalitions in the National Council regarding all types of votes.[14] This figure shows that only in a very limited number of cases do all four governmental parties vote together

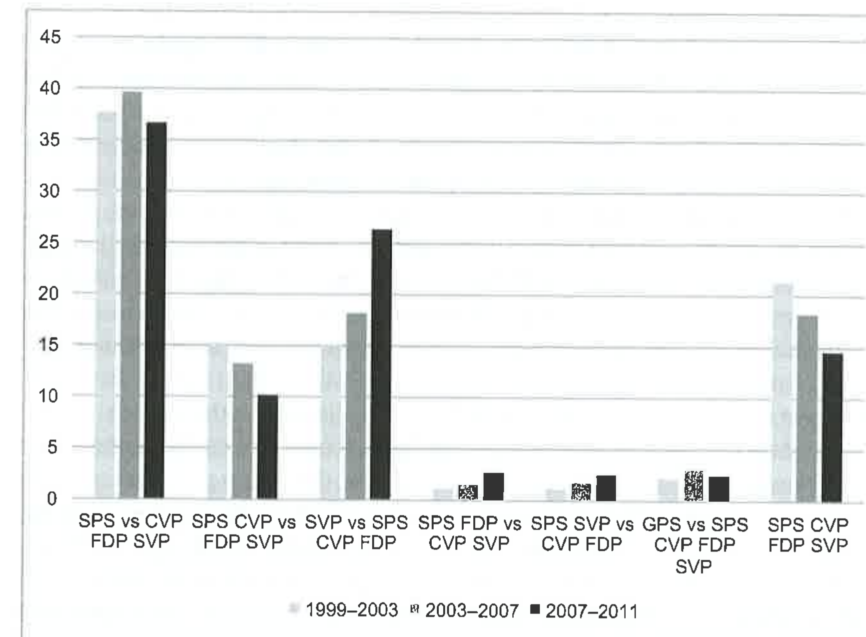

Figure 12.2 Frequency and evolution of legislative coalitions in the National Council (percentage)

Source: Adapted from Smartmonitor (www.smartmonitor.ch)

in parliament, which would be unconceivable in a parliamentary system. The figures were slightly above 20 per cent between 1999 and 2003 and have even declined to less than 15 per cent in the 2007–2011 legislature (see last column and GPS vs. rest). Furthermore, these figures also show the prevalence and durability of a left-right cleavage in spite of consensual politics (left column) and the increasing opposition between the national-populist SVP and the other governmental parties, including those of the moderate right (third column from the left). Also of note are situations of a cleavage between a centre-left and a centre-right bloc (second column from the left).

These coalition patterns confirm the existence of two poles of opposition within governmental parties. MPs of the SPS often vote in line with Green MPs but against the three right-wing parties in government. Much less frequently, they ally also with the Christian Democrats and oppose an FDP-SVP coalition. Both configurations are relatively stable or declining over time. This contrasts with the share of votes on which the SVP opposes all the other governmental parties, which has been steadily rising in the new millennium to reach almost a quarter of all votes in the 2007–2011 legislative period.

Regarding the interpretation of the substance of these changes, we can refer to a recent study of coalition formation in the Swiss parliament showing that the SVP on the one hand and the SPS on the other are less likely to join a broad governmental coalition, especially on their core electoral issues (Traber 2015). This means that the SVP is particularly likely to oppose all the other parties on immigration or EU issues, while the Social Democrats often oppose other governmental parties on economic, welfare state or environmental issues. Taken together, these trends suggest that beyond the level of opposition documented in the former sections, opposition patterns have also changed qualitatively with coalitions at variable geometry forming on different topics.

It is also worth looking at parties' strategies outside of parliament. In that regard, the Swiss case seems to follow a general trend of an increase in mediatisation of various forms of activities and a permanent campaigning strategy by parties. However, Switzerland is unique with regard to institutions that allow such party strategies outside of parliament. Indeed, direct democratic institutions enable parties (and in fact any political actor) to oppose decisions that have been taken in parliament or to put new issues on the agenda.

Opponents to a bill are well aware that the outcome of a parliamentary vote can be reversed in a referendum and tend to use this "veto point" as well. In addition, even those that supported a bill in parliament may oppose it in the referendum if they feel that public opinion is against it ("bandwagon" effect). In the early 1990s, the majority of MPs interviewed for a research study (63%) said they would not hesitate to use the referendum venue (Kobach 1993: 160–161; see also Papadopoulos 2001). There is certainly no sign of a substantial change in the use of optional referendums by parties during the 1999–2011 period. For over a century now (since the beginning of the 1900s) the proportion of laws that are challenged in a referendum remains stable below 10 per cent. What has changed, however, is the behaviour of political parties in referendums, and the analysis of government–opposition relations through coalition patterns and direct democratic activity reveals some long-term trends. Long-term analyses show less cohesive support for governmental voting recommendations by the governmental parties in the referendum votes that were held in the last decades. The Socialist Party has traditionally been the least congruent with government stances, so the most striking evolution is that of the SVP: although it would almost always agree with the governmental recommendations until the 1980s, its level of agreement has steadily declined to below 50 per cent in 2011–2013. More generally the cohesion of the "front" of governmental parties has also been constantly eroded: when the oversized governmental formula including the four major parties was established (1959), those parties would agree on a common position in about 80 per cent of referendum votes; this has almost never happened since the beginning of the twenty-first century – there is at least one of them (usually SP or SVP) that dissents (Vatter 2014: 535–536).

Direct democracy also allows political actors to initiate new bills. For a proposal to be put to the popular vote, it suffices to gather enough signatures from among citizens (100,000) within a period of 18 months. Government and parliament may support or (much more frequently) oppose popular initiatives but cannot prevent a popular vote from being held, unless the promoters of an initiative agree to withdraw it after having obtained at least partial satisfaction through parliamentary legislation. An analysis of the specific role of the popular initiative shows that initiative use has significantly increased, first in the 1970s and again in the last decade. While some of the increase can be explained by the fact that, relative to the population, the minimal number of signatures required has decreased, initiative use can also be linked to the strategic use of direct democracy campaigns for electoral purposes and to the fact that the level of political competition has increased (Leemann 2015). Parties have an incentive to put forward the themes on which they have an electoral advantage, and direct democratic votes represent an opportunity to increase the saliency of the issues that they claim to "own". This has to be read in the context of an increased mediatisation nowadays in which political actors, and especially parties with a more oppositional profile such as the SPS and the SVP, have a strong incentive to try to get as much media attention as possible. As a matter of fact, in the years we are interested in, the vast majority of the optional referendums or initiatives that have been sponsored by parties concern the SVP, the SPS, the Greens and on some rare occasion the small evangelical party, EVP, and the nationalist EDU.[15] Popular initiatives are seldom accepted in the direct democratic vote; it has to be noted, however, that in the last years the national-populist SVP has frequently been able to win such votes on issues related to immigration and multiculturalism.

All in all, the classical left-right cleavage remains very present on economic, fiscal and social policy, while new divisions and thus coalition patterns, particularly on cultural issues, immigration and European integration have gained in importance over time and oppose the SVP to the other major parties (Bornschier 2015). These changes mean that there is a (slowly) increasing diversity and issue specificity in opposition patterns, which has resulted in the gradual sedimentation of two opposition poles in Swiss politics, respectively the left and more recently the national-populist one.

Conclusions

State-building in Switzerland has been characterised by the establishment of "consociational" mechanisms of vertical (federalism) and gradually horizontal (between parties) power-sharing (Linder and Mueller 2017). Katzenstein (1985) observed in addition that the search for consensus is particularly widespread in small European countries because of their economic vulnerability and their dependence on the outside world. In Switzerland, such a situation "has favoured the development of a sense of common national destiny, itself propitious to the emergence of 'corporatist-like' arrangements between the State, interest groups, and political parties" (Sciarini 2007: 492). Since the 1990s, however, the Swiss "concordance" system has been facing some important challenges in a more turbulent political context, mainly related to the internationalisation of policymaking (even though Switzerland is not an EU member) and to the emergence of a new cleavage between the partisans of the openness of the country and the defenders of Swiss traditions.

As regards the relations between government and parliament in a system where their mutual independence resembles presidential rather than parliamentary regimes, we witness a strengthening of the parliament's influence over the decision-making process (creation of 12 standing committees for each chamber, new Federal Act on the Parliament), an increased professionalisation of parliamentary mandates (rise of allowances for MPs and parliamentary groups), and an acceleration of parliamentary activity (parliamentary initiatives, motions, etc.). The parliament's activities are more numerous, and especially parliamentary motions, interpellations and questions or initiatives have become much more frequent than they used to be. Our analyses of parliamentary activity show both continuity and change with regard to what can be defined as parliamentary opposition. First, the Federal Government can continue to count on a very broad support when it submits bills to the parliament. All large parties tend to vote in favour of these bills, and except for the Swiss People's Party, their support has been relatively stable over the 12 years under investigation. At the same time, a relatively large amount of government bills are being modified by parliamentary committees before being approved. The share of bills that are amended remains, however, quite stable over time, and one should not overstate the importance of amendments brought to these bills.

For these reasons, Switzerland remains an exceptional case with regard to the lack of opposition as understood in most other political contexts. Nevertheless, not so benign changes have occurred since 1999, and especially since 2007. The partisan background of parliamentary initiatives has changed, with the SVP having become more active on the front of initiating new legislation. Further, the voting pattern of members of what has become during this period the largest party has also changed: the SVP has moved from a faction mainly supporting government to the one that most closely resembles what could be called opposition.

This leads us to the observable changes with regard to partisan competition and to the power relations between the main political parties. The electoral force of the SVP has increased, in conjunction with its much more prominent national-populist orientation, and mainly to the detriment of the more moderate FDP and CVP; however, the latter retained their parliamentary influence as the most loyal to the government parties, while the increasingly oppositional role of the SVP actually implies a loss of policy influence that contrasts with its electoral successes. However, the SVP has been recently particularly successful with its frequent use of the mechanism of the popular initiative in the direct democratic arena. The left-right cleavage continues to be a major structuring element of the Swiss political life, although nowadays the SPS and more generally the left have more chances than in the past to coalesce on specific issues with the moderate right-wing parties, and to isolate thereby the SVP in its oppositional role.

The change in the behaviour of the SVP is in fact the most notable transformation documented by our analyses. Chronologically, such a change perfectly coincides with the beginning of the financial crisis and the Great Recession that ensued. In his conclusive remarks to the special issue "Consensus Lost? Disenchanted Democracy in Switzerland", Hanspeter Kriesi goes so far as to describe the Great Recession and the Euro-crisis as the "forgotten elephant in the room" (Kriesi 2015: 735). However, one should not think that the roots of the transformations of the Swiss political system have mainly to be sought in the state of the European economy. Indeed, Switzerland has been hit by the crisis relatively late, experiencing only a moderate recession in 2009. Changes in the country's political landscape have been gradual. Most notably, the party system has been changing since the acceleration of the European integration process in the 1990s that also affected Switzerland, and the radicalisation of the SVP has to be read in that context. Such a radicalisation in turn has more to do with issues that this party owns in the cultural policy domain than with the economic dimension of politics. Kriesi (2015: 736) interestingly points out that "as in other countries of Western Europe, the sea change in domestic Swiss politics initiated by the rise of the radical populist right had taken place quite some time before the intervention of the Great Recession. The rise of the populist right had preceded the crisis and by the time the crisis intervened it already was an established force." In that respect at least, there is no Swiss exceptionalism.

Notes

1 However, in an international comparison with 19 other parliaments of the OECD countries the Swiss Parliament continues to be characterised by one of the weakest degrees of professionalisation. Moreover, the Swiss MPs earn less than the majority of national parliamentarians in Western countries (Z'graggen 2009: 100–103), in spite of Switzerland counting among the wealthiest countries.
2 In the legislature of 2007–2011, 25 referendum votes took place. In only 2 of them could the government count on support for its bills by all governmental parties; the SP recommended rejection in 13 cases and the SVP in 12 (Sciarini 2011).
3 Between 1959 and 2003, the seven seats were allocated this way: 2 FDP, 2 CVP, 2 SPS and 1 SVP.
4 In our analyses, we exclude therefore votes on motions, postulates and parliamentary initiatives.
5 An additional – more technical – argument for choosing this option is linked to the fact that the number of readings differs largely across bills. Thus, aggregating the results for all votes would give much more weight in the analysis to some bills than to others that might be substantively equal or even more important but which generated fewer votes.
6 To be precise we take the share of "yea" votes from among valid votes, thus excluding abstentions or absences from the analysis.
7 In the legislature of 2007–2011, the CVP group has included also the members of Evangelical Party (EVP) and of Green Liberal Party (GLP).
8 We are referring here to the fact that the SVP is a typical national-populist party that combines the plea for national sovereignty with an anti-elitist discourse (Mazzoleni 2008).
9 Note that for computing these numbers, we have taken all bills classified by the parliamentary services as governmental bills excluding reports of the government, which are never amended. In total 28 of 84 bills were amended in 2006 and 44 out of 94 in 2010.
10 The ten categories include: government bills (*Geschäfte Bundesrates*); parliament bills (*Geschäfte Parlaments*); parliamentary initiative (*parlamentarische Initiative*); cantonal initiative (*Standesintiative*); parliamentary motion (*Motion*); parliamentary postulate (*Postulat*); parliamentary interpellation (*Interpellation*); parliamentary recommendation (*Empfehlung*); parliamentary request (*Anfrage*); questions to government (*Frage*).
11 A motion is binding and asks the government to submit a bill to the Federal Assembly or to take a certain measure. Motions can be submitted by the majority of a standing committee, during the plenary sessions, by a parliamentary group or by a member of the parliament. Motions must be accepted by both Chambers.
12 The parliamentary initiative can be submitted by a member of the parliament, by a parliamentary group or by a standing committee and it allows proposal of the draft of a new enactment (federal bills, ordinances, federal decrees). The legislative work is realised by a standing committee of the National Council or of the Council of States.
13 The allocation of seats in the standing committees is made according to the size of every parliamentary group.
14 Similar data is not available in the Council of States due to a different voting procedure; in addition, SP and above all SVP are underrepresented in this Chamber due to the election mode; for more details, see Schwarz 2009: 47ff.
15 Source: swissvotes dataset, www.swissvotes.ch.

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13 Conclusions

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The previous chapters described how opposition parties operate in the specific contexts of 11 selected European countries.[1] The introduction outlined what was expected to affect the opposition parties' behaviour and questioned whether we were witnessing the development of general patterns or new trends, or rather extreme variation was still the main characteristic of opposition in European democracies in terms of conflict or consensus, but also of general strategies adopted in parliament. In fact, while opposition parties in parliament may vote for or against the government's legislative proposals, they can also propose their own legislation and/or focus on the government's scrutiny. In doing so, they can adopt behaviour that is more or less consensual and decide to be particularly active or quite inactive, respectively. These strategic choices will be influenced by both their goals, i.e. votes, office, policy and several concomitant factors that are related, internally, to the party context and the institutional setting and, externally, the onset of the economic crisis and the consequent increasing intervention of the EU in the national legislative process.

The conclusions will make a detailed reassessment of these expectations. We will start by presenting the comparative results for the opposition parties' behaviour on the basis of the findings in the country chapters before briefly addressing which general observations about parliamentary opposition can be formulated; finally, we will identify the overall patterns of conflict or consensus and how partisan and country features interact in this regard.

The opposition parties' behaviour in parliament: findings and explanations

We expected the new (and frequently permanent) opposition parties to be generally less likely to cooperate with the government than mainstream (temporary) opposition parties, in terms of voting behaviour, and generally more active than the mainstream parties in opposition with regard to legislative initiative and government scrutiny. Furthermore, we expected these differences to increase after the outbreak of the global financial crisis and that the latter