An anti-establishment mainstream Party.

The Swiss People's Party since the 1990s[1]

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Switzerland, Europe's oldest democracy, with a reputation for being the land of direct democracy, was spared fascist and Nazi regimes. Nonetheless, it has had its share of extreme right-wing and right-wing populist parties since the end of the Second World War. In the 1960s and 1970s, a number of small parties such as the Movement against Over-Foreignization launched a series of popular initiatives, some of which were supported by a significant percentage of Swiss voters. Later, several opposition parties, in particular the Swiss Democrats and the Freedom Party, mobilised anti-immigration issues and systematic criticism of the political establishment. However, those parties remained marginal in the Swiss system throughout the 1980s (Skenderovic 2009a, Altermatt et al. 1994, Altermatt / Kriesi 1995).

The 1990s represented a turning point. Radical right-wing themes and populist claims were gradually embraced by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), a mainstream party that went through a profound radicalisation. Traditionally moderate and centre-right, the new SVP moved decisively to the right with a style that was similar to that of other so-called populist parties of Europe, taking an anti-immigration and anti-supranational political stance, combined with a pro-liberal economic agenda in the economic field. Since the 2000s, even though political scientists working on populism and radical right-wing parties have not always included the SVP in their studies, more and more scholars have begun to consider it as close to, or a member, of this political family and have tried to

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explain its success using similar conceptual tools (Betz 1994, Decker 2004, Geden 2006, Mazzoleni / Skenderovic 2007, Mudde 2007, Mazzoleni 2008, Skenderovic 2009b, Bornschier 2010). By the mid-1990s, the SVP was a relatively small party representing about 11 per cent of the electorate. Then, after a significant electoral advance, it has been arose as the leading Swiss party since the national level in the 2000s. Between 1991 and 2019, the SVP rose from 11.9 to 25.6 percent of the votes, which is the highest percentage that a Swiss party has reached in the National Council (the lower chamber of the federal parliament) since the 1910s. Currently, aside from the regionalist *Lega dei Ticinesi* which is the main party in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino, and the *Mouvement des Citoyens* in Geneva, the SVP is the main party representing a radical right-wing populist stance in all regions of Switzerland.

Regional support and voters' profile

The electoral success of the SVP corresponds to relative changing characteristics of its supporters. According to the main academic surveys, in the last decades certain elements of the electorate have persistently been over-represented among SVP voters, including groups such as farmers, small-business owners and, often, males (Selb / Lachat 2004, Kitschelt / McGann 2003, Oesch 2008). Since 1995, the profile of SVP voters has evolved in multiple ways. After years of being an agrarian and largely rural party, supported only in certain cantons, and in particular in the German-speaking ones, it expanded to encompass the entire national territory. Although in urban centres and in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking regions it still remains weaker, the party has been able to achieve the support of a more socially heterogeneous electorate in the country as a whole.

The party's Protestant roots are still present, but the addition of non-practising Catholics as supporters has further widened the party's influence. In the federal elections of 1995 and 1999, adults between the ages of 18 and 24 were under-represented, while in recent elections the SVP made greater gains within this age group. Educational factors play a huge role in the SVP's support (Lutz 2015). The less educated the voters, the more likely they are to vote for the SVP (De Weerd et al. 2004: 83 ff.). Increasingly, unskilled workers and voters with lower incomes have joined the party, especially in the period between 1999 and 2003 (Mazzoleni et al. 2005). Overall, the working class, particularly the blue-collar contingent, has carried significant weight within the SVP (Oesch 2008).

According to some scholars, the case of the SVP confirms the thesis of "modernity's losers", a reaction against globalisation from people affected by socio-economic transformation (Kriesi et

al. 2005). This perspective emphasises the divide between social and cultural specialists and unskilled workers, as the former support a culturally and nationally open view and the latter tend to be more conservative. However, farmers and small business owners are still over-represented (Kitschelt / McGann 2003), and these groups are not necessarily included among the losers in the globalisation process within the Swiss context (Gottraux / Péchu 2011).

Endogenous resources and political opportunities

The SVP provides resources – material and symbolic – which are incomparably greater than those of its direct competitors (e. g. Mazzoleni / Skenderovic 2007). Crucial among the internal resources was the role played by the new party leadership, and particularly by its 'charismatic' leader, the multimillionaire entrepreneur Christoph Blocher (Schilling 1994, Gsteiger 2002, Somm 2009), who enhanced the leadership structure to the national level. Unlike other Swiss parties, historically run by rather weak national directorates, the new SVP was built in a decisive way around its leader. The party also introduced new campaign methods: a polemical style, negative campaigning and a large-scale investment in advertising (Skenderovic 2009b). The reinforcement of the national organisation in terms of mobilisation, ideological cohesiveness and internal discipline has been one of the main reasons for the SVP's success (Mazzoleni & Rossini 2016).

The SVP has been also able to exploit certain institutional opportunities within the Swiss political system, such as the proportional electoral system (Carter 2002), which gave the party a boost, especially in the election of the lower chamber of the federal parliament and in the cantonal parliaments. Conversely, wherever elections are conducted under the majority system, particularly for the upper chamber (*Ständerat*) and the cantonal governments, the SVP struggles to gain seats, remaining a marginal party. The availability of direct democracy tools was also crucial and not only at the federal level. They enabled the SVP to deploy an intensive strategy of referendums and popular initiatives, either as the sword of Damocles hanging over government decision-making or as a means of defining and imposing the SVP's agenda. In the Swiss polity, direct democracy functions as an integrating factor for oppositional actors, its use often supporting the tendency to pass preliminary agreements that involve movements and opposition parties with referendum potential (Kobach 1993, Linder 2010). However, in the hands of the SVP during the 1990s and 2000s, it obviously served as an opposition tool for several issues, including immigration and anti-EU integration, favouring a contentious and anti-establishment attitude and providing the opportunity to influence the agenda. The referendum arena was also an opportunity to mobilise SVP activists and to capitalise political resources for electoral goals (Mazzoleni 2008).

Socio-cultural uncertainty

The strategy of the new SVP was to exploit the social and cultural uncertainty that has emerged in the Swiss political landscape over recent decades. First and foremost, we have seen the emergence of a lasting climate of uncertainty. The explosion of the socio-economic crisis of the early 1990s contributed to a structural shift, and for the first time after at least 30 years of the continuous economic growth that had made Switzerland one of the richest countries in the world, prosperity could no longer be taken for granted. The end of jobs for life, and indeed the rising spectre of unemployment, became real risks for every citizen. For at least two generations, unemployment and the fear of it had been foreign to the social experience of the Swiss voter. In contrast, since the 2000s, opinion polls have shown that unemployment or the risk of losing one's job are nearly always at the top of the population's greatest worries.

Social and economic transformations have undermined a cornerstone of the country's image, of Switzerland as a model and guarantor of economic success, which was consolidated in the 1950s and 1960s as one of the basic principles of Swiss identity (Furrer 1998). Uncertainty at the cultural level is also, perhaps above all, expressed through the questioning of one of the pillars of national identity – independence and autonomy in foreign affairs. The exceptionalism that created the image of Switzerland as a happy island in the centre of Western Europe, and profoundly shaped the country's post-war identity, was put to the test by the end of the bipolar world and the acceleration of the European Union. At the beginning of the 1990s, the government and the majority of Swiss political powers began a new strategy aimed at greater international integration, from membership in the United Nations to bilateral agreements with the European Union. Mobilising against EU integration of Switzerland over the last three decades, the strategy of the SVP straddled the socio-economic and cultural crises, responding in ways that distinguished it or set it up in opposition to prevailing norms, focusing on an electorate in search of assurances and potentially dissatisfied with the political establishment (Mazzoleni 2008).

Campaign modernisation

The SVP's strategies were reinforced by a corresponding boosting media logic within political sphere and electoral campaign, which gave the party significantly greater political heft. During the 1990s, Switzerland saw the emergence of a new media competitiveness, generated by the advent of free newspapers and the Internet, which led to unprecedented sensationalising and personalising of

Swiss politics and, specifically, of election campaigns. These changes gave new visibility to the SVP's provocative messages (Marcinkowski 2007, Weinmann 2009). Though still trailing the major European democracies, the modernisation of political communication and election campaigning took root and spread through Switzerland over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. These transformations also involved the other main parties in different forms, but not in any way that could stop the SVP from maintaining a significant competitive advantage in areas like campaign financing. Between the federal elections of 1995 and 2007, all the main national parties saw their national budgets increase significantly. However, while the estimates remain approximate, the SVP has consistently been able to depend on a much higher campaign budget (Gunzinger 2008: 81). A post-electoral survey regularly conducted from 2007 shows the SVP candidates for the federal parliamentary elections declaring a higher average expenditure than the candidates of any other party.

Opponent within government coalition

To explain the success of the SVP, we must also consider the party's position and ability to manage its government participation and oppositional posture. According to Alexandre Dézé (2004), in the last decades, the European right wing, or extreme right-wing parties that have attacked the establishment can roughly be grouped into two categories. The first is characterised by an uncompromising decision to stand out, which is expressed through a political marginalising process. It unites small extremist groups, by definition anti-parliamentarian, and parties that limit themselves to parliamentary opposition. Parties from the second category will instead accept government participation, often through an alliance with mainstream parties. When these anti-establishment parties enter a relatively large government coalition, they then have to choose between three options: to adapt, to resist or to select a third option that combines the first two. Generally speaking, it is difficult to find a good balance in pursuit of this third solution, especially over the long term.

The SVP represents one of the rare cases of a party remaining within the governing coalition while maintaining an oppositional style. Over the past 20 years, no other European party that has developed radical right-wing positions and populist claims has managed to be almost uninterruptedly represented in a government coalition at the national level. While such balancing acts are relatively exceptional in the current European landscape, the new SVP has been able through the 1990s and 2000s to maintain and manage an ambivalent position between anti-establishment postures and government participation as a party "of struggle and of government" (to

borrow an expression often used in the past to define the role of left-wing parties in European democracies).

The SVP's ongoing strength was made possible, at least in part, by the legacy of the SVP as a former mainstream and government party, founded several decades ago. Though officially constituted in 1971, the party's beginnings date back to the 1910s. By 1929, a member of one of the two parties that would merge to form the SVP – the Farmers, Artisans and Citizens Party (FACP) – had joined the governing federal coalition. In the following decades, with an uninterrupted presence, the FACP became one of the pillars of the so-called Swiss consociational government, and since 1959 a fully-fledged member of the "magic formula", the grand coalition of all the main Swiss parties, from the social-democrats to the centre-right parties. Since 1959, as the smallest of the government parties, the FACP (later the SVP) was granted one seat in an unchanged government coalition. In 2003, the new SVP succeeded in changing the power balance within government by obtaining a second seat at the expense of the Christian Democratic Party. For four years, the leader of the SVP, Christoph Blocher, elected as a member of the government by the majority of the parliament, played a key role in the Swiss government as the *enfant terrible* of national politics (Mazzoleni / Skenderovic 2007). The ability of the SVP to manage the oppositional posture within the government did not prevent it from sustaining a major internal crisis. In 2007, Blocher was not re-elected into the government and his party underwent an internal crisis and schism that damaged the credibility of the national leadership. If these events partly explain its electoral difficulties in some of the past elections, the SVP has still continued up until now to maintain, except for a short period in 2008, its government participation balancing pragmatism and an oppositional stance in the following years.

National identity and liberalism

What is the winning formula of the SVP? The rhetoric provided by the radical right (or populist) parties is a crucial element in explaining not only the characteristics of them, but also the ability of these parties to respond to the latent demands of followers and voters in particular. In Europe, since the 1980s, it would have been more appropriate to talk about the two winning formulas that made it possible to impose an acting political force connected to the radical right-wing populist family on the electoral field. Despite some ambivalence and shift, the first of these winning formulas was a mix between authoritarianism, or conservatism with reference to cultural values, and protectionism at the economic level, thus demonstrating a shift towards economic nationalism seen as a response

to the anxieties and insecurities caused by globalisation. The theme of national preference developed by the French National Front was a part of the second formula, along with the more general idea that the welfare state should not be dismantled but reserved for nationals only. The second would have been the combination of a resolutely neo-liberal economic stand, and an authoritarian and particularistic approach to issues such as participative democracy, citizens' rights and lifestyle (Kitschelt 1995).

The SVP tends to embrace the second formula. The defence of national identity, the claims against European integration, the fear of foreigners and the criticism of elites in power have become key issues for the new SVP (Hildebrand 2017). These themes have been exposed in their political and electoral platforms since 1995. The defence of national integrity – particularly in terms of the Swiss cultural and institutional traditions of neutrality, independence, federalism and direct democracy – against any supranational political integration and multicultural society, are the main issues of the party agenda. Indeed, campaigning against almost all attempts towards European integration has characterised the history of the party since the early 1990s. Struggles against immigrants and asylum seekers accused of provoking an increase in crime and welfare abuse are also recurrent themes in its popular initiatives and referendums.

With respect to economic issues, its rhetoric clearly insisted on the defence of the free market. The new SVP, like the Swiss Freedom Party, was at the heart of the neo-liberal conservative revolution, which refocused on values in line with the corporate sector, economic growth and individual freedom. Unlike the *Lega* and the *Mouvement des citoyens*, which often joined in anti-globalisation critiques, the official discourse of the SVP supported the economic globalisation process. The SVP was neither against the World Trade Organisation nor firmly against the reinforcement of Swiss economic treaties around the world. The SVP did not oppose the bilateral agreements with the EU in 2000. If it is much more critical of them today, particularly of the agreement regarding the free movement of EU citizens, it is for reasons tied to an increase of foreign workers in Switzerland, and to the risk that these accords could open the doors for the country's eventual entry into the EU.

However, the ideology of free trade only partially inspired its economic stand on agricultural policy. The SVP supported the liberalisation of the agricultural sector, but also demanded a policy that secured sufficient income to help farmers fight the deterioration of their living standards. The SVP was not ready to give up its former election base. Its criticisms of social spending and state bureaucracy did not lead it to firmly oppose social benefits as such. Indeed, according to Blocher, the welfare state would be a new type of "slavery", a source of "waste" and "red tape" that did not

help the needy. At the same time, on behalf of hard-working and responsible people, he made sure to denounce the "profiteers" (fraudulent refugees and the unemployed, drug addicts and so on) in the name of a "producerist" view (Ivaldi & Mazzoleni 2019). "Preference" should go to those who "deserve" it, according to a perspective favoured by the national-populist discourse and that some authors qualify as "welfare chauvinism" (Decker 2004: 218 f.).

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Tradition and modernity

According to several scholars, the modern populist phenomenon took into account a dimension that was not immediately obvious: the ability to navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. According to Pierre-André Taguieff (2001), national-populist rhetoric expresses the simultaneous presence of "anti-modern reactions" and "hyper-democratism". For Gino Germani (1978), the success of national-populism comes from its ambiguity, which is to say from its ability to formulate a political response to conflicts caused by the acceleration of modernisation. Similarly, the key to the SVP's success relates to the double standard of its discourse, which is simultaneously against and in.

The central component of the SVP's winning formula is the defence of Swiss exceptionalism, which encompasses both traditional and modern components. One can interpret the variations and ambiguities of the SVP program in the same way, notably with regard to the *Sonderfall*, which refers to the notion of Switzerland constituting a peculiar or exceptional case in the European and world landscape. This defence is not limited to opposing the loss of national sovereignty, nor to preserving Swiss identity (neutrality, federalism, direct democracy), but expresses the idea of the country's traditional openness in the economic field.

The discourse of the new SVP broke the traditional image of the Swiss *Sonderfall*, which had until the 1980s been dominated by movements against overpopulation. Emphasis on the *Sonderfall* has become the key factor in the SVP's winning formula, distinguishing it from other government parties, among other things. The SVP refused to give up the Swiss *Sonderfall*, unlike the other main parties which have been accused of betraying the true Swiss legacy. As it attacked the large government coalition, the SVP also often criticised the political class as well as the Federal Council as a whole, accusing them of helplessness, incapacity and even of betraying the true concerns of the Swiss people through left-wing and pro-EU positions.

However, beyond the traditional representation of a Switzerland which had completely cut itself off from external contacts, remaining essentially rural, in a somewhat mythical revival of the national enclave, Blocher's SVP tried to introduce a new version of the *Sonderfall*, which did not give up the old one, but instead modernised it. For the new SVP, the Swiss exception combined traditions of independence and neutrality with the economic prosperity that had shaped the wealthiest country on earth, according to the image of the country in the 1960s and 1970s. Under this model, Switzerland became an economic success because it was politically and militarily independent and internally strengthened by the successful stewardship of federalism and direct democracy.

The *Sonderfall* discourse built a kind of bridge between the generation which had experienced neutrality and independence during the Second World War and the new generations that were looking for references but remained confident in the Swiss promise of material happiness. More generally this discourse tried to seduce voters who experienced the 1990s crisis as a split between Swiss identity and economic growth, frustrated by a new context in which old promises appear to have been betrayed.

The ideological winning formula of the SVP has been stable over the years, although some new issues have become part of its political agenda during the first decade of this century. There is the issue of education, in which the SVP positions itself as the defender of more traditional styles of schooling, distant from the wretched results of 1968. Above all, the SVP has helped launch the popular initiative against minarets, which took 57 per cent of the national vote in 2009. This was the first referendum of its kind in Europe. Though in line with its traditional position on immigration, it was the first time the SVP took action on an issue tied largely to religion, positing itself as a defender of Christian culture. In 2011, the SVP became the first Swiss party to integrate the fight against the "growing Islamisation" as part of its electoral platform. However, in the last years the party's agenda has been newly concentrated on its "core" issues, such as immigration and European integration. Emphasising its opposition to the bilateral agreement with EU on free movement of people, the SVP launched and won in 2014 a relevant popular initiative "against mass immigration", demanding quotas for all immigrants entering Switzerland.

The intra-party dynamic

It is with this agenda that Blocher has developed his staying power as the main leader of the party, and after 2008 as its "éminence grise", for almost 20 years, creating a collective radical leadership against the old and moderate agenda. The transformation of power dynamics within the party,

which led to the moderate wing remaining a minority, began with the campaign for the referendum on the European Economic Area. Indeed, in 1992, the government and parliament urged voters to confirm Switzerland's entry into this important treaty with the EU. While the SVP's moderate wing, headed by the Bern branch of the party, supported the majority position of the government and the other parties, a faction led by Blocher and the Zurich branch of the party succeeded in persuading a majority of the SVP to oppose the treaty. This turned out to be one of the most intensely fought referenda in Swiss history, consecrating Blocher as the leader of the Eurosceptics, both inside and outside his national party. Thus, between 1992 and 1996, an internal clash was brewing, which would lead to Ueli Maurer, a politician close to Blocher, ascending to the national presidency, a position from which he would then foster further transformations.

Since 1996, a continuous advance of the party at the electoral as well as the organisational level has occurred. Previously, the party had been present only in the Protestant cantons and almost exclusively in the German-speaking cantons (with the exception of Vaud and Ticino), but between 1991 and 2002, the party created 13 new cantonal branches, along with hundreds of municipal branches throughout the country. These new branches were generally in line with the Zurich wing, consolidating also its prevalence within the national party. However, the new strategy and the organisational transformation also set the stage for an internal crisis. The greater internal cohesion and centralisation of the new SVP created a tension within the culture of consensus and subnational autonomy that strongly dominates Swiss party politics. Swiss legacy is founded on rather weak party organisations, with limited financial means and a low degree of professionalism of party staff (Ladner / Brändle 2011),[2] which reflects organisational patterns fostered by federalism and direct democracy (Gruner 1977).

The most important internal tension within the "new" SVP came to a head in December 2007, with the failed attempt to re-elect Christoph Blocher to the federal government. Blocher was his party's only official candidate, but a parliamentary majority elected another SVP member, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, the representative of the Grisons canton. This replacement created a crisis within the SVP that continues to this day. Up to that moment, the new radical and the old moderate camps in the SVP, the latter represented mainly by the cantons of Bern and Grisons, had coexisted without insurmountable tensions, but in the early months of 2008, the national party, with the support of the

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[2] As one of the exceptions among Western democracies, in Switzerland there are no spending limits, or direct public funding of campaigns, nor any obligation to declare sources of party funding to the federal authorities.

majority of the parliamentary group, decided to oust Widmer-Schlumpf and the Grisons section of the party that stood behind her. Soon, a faction of the SVP from Bern and other cantons chose to break from the party entirely, forming a new and more moderate party with regard, for instance, to the European integration issue. They called themselves the Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (BDP) and brought together the outcasts and dissidents of the SVP including Samuel Schmid, the moderate representative in the federal government. After this split, since 2008 the SVP has been able to ensure strong organisational settings and internal cohesion as a condition for new electoral advances (Mazzoleni & Rossini 2016), although the role of Christoph Blocher was gradually diminished.

A party system shift

The success of the SVP has manifold consequences. The first consequence is that the SVP succeeded in attracting voters from the extreme right and the radical right, in particular from the Swiss Democrats and the Freedom Party. The second is an increasing ideological polarisation, as that the growth of the SVP corresponded to a strengthening of the leftist parties, from the Socialists to the Greens, at least up until 2007. The third is that the two main Swiss centre-right parties, the Liberal Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party, have suffered particularly from the electoral rise of the SVP. Already in electoral decline in the 1980s, these two historical governing parties of the centre-right – and as such the principal guarantors of the stability of the Swiss political system for over a century – had lost the support of a significant portion of the electorate. Their erosion continued through the 1990s and the 2000s, reinforcing above all the SVP. Until the late 1990s, the attitude of the two old centre-right parties toward the SVP's electoral growth was to minimise it, along with the significance of their own decline (Mazzoleni 2009).

They were convinced that their pivotal role in government could not be threatened by transient populist victories. As strict government parties which have been represented in the federal government without interruption since the nineteenth century, they are also resilient in the face of the populist style of the SVP. However, the attitude of these parties, and of the Social Democrats, who have also been members of the federal government for decades, has been ambivalent (Bernhard, Biancalana, Mazzoleni 2020). If the new SVP was able to participate in the federal government in recent years, it is because the other members of the coalition accepted and, in part, legitimised their participation. In general, they considered the SVP's success a limited threat. Since the SVP was a mainstream government party before its radicalisation, this served as an essential

factor in its legitimisation. Until now, government partners have generally maintained that such a powerful party cannot be excluded from an all-party government.

At the same time, the SVP's participation in the government coalition is a result of the specific interest of the centre-right parties in reinforcing right-wing government policy on several issues. In order to forge timely agreements with mainstream centre-right parties, notably the Liberal Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party, on specific issues such as the reform of the welfare state, asylum rights and so on, even the most radical wing of the SVP has been prepared to make concessions. On the other hand, despite its populist and adversarial posture on several issues, the new national leadership, including Blocher, never implemented any concrete strategy to abandon the government coalition, apart from a short break in 2008. Rarely does the SVP organise street demonstrations, and their links with extremist movements – beyond certain intellectual and personal ties – are unofficial and sporadic (Skenderovic 2009b).

Moreover, the SVP does not systematically oppose the foreign policy initiatives of the Federal Council. Nor does it oppose, but rather officially supports membership in Bretton Woods institutions and the NLFA project (the new railway line through the Alps). Even after the critical turning point of 1995, the SVP was far from systematically condemning the decisions of the majority parties and federal authorities. Prior to the 2001 popular vote on UN membership, the national SVP declared itself in favour of Swiss membership, in spite of opposition from the Zurich branch. Furthermore, the new leadership of the SVP has strengthened connections with the world of Swiss finance, and not just with the interests of farmers; more recently, it has not officially supported the referendum launched against the agreement on Swiss banking secrecy with some EU countries. In fact, the national organisation of the SVP would not oppose the official position of Swiss banks, which is pro-agreement, leaving the youth organisation and some cantonal branches of the party to support the referendum. Blocher himself, after all, came up as both an industrial and financial entrepreneur, which is a function that he has maintained almost throughout his political career since the 1970s.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the rise of the SVP lies in its contribution to making Swiss politics more competitive and uncertain. The SVP, with its strategy, its mobilisation, its political and electoral victories, and its central role in the government and political landscape, contributed significantly to changing the rules of the game. During the 1990s and 2000s, the consensual Swiss model had to face increasing challenges in electoral, referendum, parliamentary and government arenas. Among the most significant aspects is that the federal government elections – symbol of the stability of the political system – had never been so uncertain since the foundation

of the federal state in 1848. Another aspect is the personalisation of politics, through the media and other channels. While the leadership of the main national parties had always been relatively weak, both with regard to the members of government and the cantonal sections, with Blocher's arrival, all the main parties strengthened their national leadership and presidencies (Mazzoleni 2009: 431 ff.). The collegial Swiss system is among the most resistant to any kind of monocratic trend in the highest government offices: there is no head of government, nor is there any real president of the Confederation, a role filled by members of the collegial government elected by parliament for one-year terms. This institutional and political legacy, together with an increased electoral uncertainty, changes in the balance of power between parties, the growing role of the media, particularly television, in political coverage (Ladner 2005) and, last but not least, the increasing criticism against and within the political establishment, contributed to transforming the conditions in which Swiss politics operate (Mazzoleni 2018).

Conclusion

It is difficult to predict the future of the SVP. Although few expect that the party will lose its position as the biggest Swiss party in the next time, its evolution remains uncertain. In the last national elections, the party experienced its most important difficulties, that is the strongest decreasing of electoral support since the 1990s, from the pick of 29,4% achieved in 2015 to 25,6% in 2019. However, it persists as the main Swiss party at the national level and the ongoing initiatives and referendum on immigration and EU integration are showing as the party is still able to mobilise on crucial issues. At the same time, new issues such as climate change, the future of the national leadership after Blocher's step backwards and the weak support in the French part of Switzerland might represent huge challenges for the SVP.

It remains also to be seen how the ambivalent position of being both a protest party and a government party, one of the reasons for the success of the SVP, will be handled in the near future. We have seen that the SVP is the only European party among the so-called radical right-wing populist parties that has managed, since 2000, to participate almost uninterruptedly in a national government coalition. During this participation, the party has maintained a challenging style, though without necessarily always siding with the opposition. This has been possible because ambivalence is written into its history as a government party, as well as into its new leadership, its internal cohesiveness, the attitude of its adversaries and partners, and the opportunities offered by the Swiss political system, including the growing uncertainty in the political field brought about by

the mobilisation of the SVP. These uncertainties open new opportunities for the SVP as a challenger and participant in the government, even in the absence of full institutional integration.

For almost 30 years, the trajectory of the SVP has contradicted, at least in part, the thesis that populist parties are condemned to institutional integration. Moreover, certain internal resources, under specific institutional and symbolic patterns, could help the party to overcome other potential internal crises. The main competitive advantage of the SVP, in comparison with its opponents and allies, is its militant and capital-intensive nature, and the fact to be a party well organised at the national level. Of course, the rise of the new SVP confirms once more the crucial role of the 'charismatic' leader, not intended only in terms of public image and of voters-leader linkage. At the same time, the story of the SVP shows also a significant transformation of the party's organisational structure, which seems to partially counterbalance the weakening of the role of the 'charismatic' leader.

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