

The Swiss Elections of 1987

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The electoral stability which is an outstanding feature of several European countries is even more pronounced in Switzerland. In fact, notwithstanding the proportional electoral system which facilitates the emergence of new parties, Swiss politics is closer to an incremental process than to radical change. There is no alternation in government which is based on the co-operation of four major parties: the Radical Party (FDP), the

Christian Democratic Party (CVP), the Social Democratic Party (SPS) and People's Party (SVP). The magic formula of seven Federal counsellors consists of each major national party having *two* members of the Federal Council and the SVP one, all of them being elected by the Swiss Parliament (National Council and Council of States). These governmental parties have a dominant position in the Swiss Parliament: even

with the loss of 7 seats in the National Council and 5.6 per cent of votes at the elections on 18 October 1987, they still have a majority of 159 (166) seats of 200 and 72.3 per cent (77.9%) of votes. They can also rely on the support of the liberal pro-governmental party with 9 (8) MPs and 2.7 per cent (2.8) of votes. The opposition is a minority in the Swiss system with 41 (34) members and 27.7 per cent (22.1%) of votes. In this political setting, even relatively important electoral shifts can hardly produce a significant change in contrast to the alternations observed in American and most European systems. Elections in Switzerland do not have a direct impact on the composition of the government even if they may influence its policy by inciting it to take into account the popular will as expressed by elections or referendums and initiatives.

Lower Turnout

Low and declining turnout is nothing new in Switzerland, and the trend has been accentuated in the last few years: about 80 per cent in 1919, and 70 per cent during the Second World War and, immediately after; it was still fluctuating over 60 per cent from 1950 to 1967; it declined rapidly to 52.4 per cent in 1975, 48.1 per cent in 1979, 48.9 per cent in 1983 and reached the bottom with 46.5 per cent in the 1987 election. Many factors partly explain the decline of electoral participation in Switzerland: a high degree of general consensus and trust in government, accompanied by few controversial issues; low sense of political efficiency, limited influence of elections on the composition of the federal government (which has not changed since 1959) and its policies; electoral stability, low competition among parties and a weak opposition; lower turnout among women who obtained the right to vote only in 1971; the frequency (average of 5 times a year) of federal, cantonal and municipal elections, referendums and initiatives. Swiss citizens have different ways in which frequently to express their opinions. On the other hand, according to *An Eight Nation Study*, general political activism is higher in Switzerland (23.7%) and the United States (29.6%) than in other western European democracies,¹ compensating to some extent for the low electoral participation (about 50% in US).

Electoral participation in 1987 varied as usual from canton to canton: the maximum of 69.6 per cent in Schaffhouse, where the vote is mandatory, and the minimum, about 22 per cent, in small cantons which have only one representative like Glaris (22.7%), Nidwalden (23.4%) and no competition like Appenzell (22.6%). In fact, in Obwalden, where two candidates were competing

for one seat, the participation rose to 50.9 per cent. Generally, the level of turnout is higher in the German part of the country: the two biggest cantons, Zurich with 35 representatives and Berne with 29, have a participation level close to the national mean 47.4 per cent and 45.7 per cent, while the two largest French speaking cantons, Vaud with 17 and Geneva with 11, have much lower participation, that is 37.5 and 38.7 per cent. This notwithstanding the fact that all these cantons witnessed hot competition among candidates.

Government parties and political élites express from time to time their serious concern about the low and declining turnout in Switzerland. Yet electoral studies show that the low electoral participation in Switzerland does not affect substantially the distribution of votes among parties² even if it does appear as a cloud in the picture of Swiss democracy.

The Candidates

Out of 200 MPs, one quarter decided not to stand in the 1987 elections. The number of candidates passed the record with 2,400 beating the 1975 record which registered 1,947 candidatures. The growth of the number of candidates is due essentially to the multiplication of the Green lists which numbered 38 lists of Green or Ecologist candidates, but also to an additional number of special lists (young people, women, regional lists) presented by the main parties. As a consequence, the proportion of women candidates grew as did the number of young candidates.

The Issues

Cantonal elections in the period 1983–87 had shown that Ecologists and minor opposition parties were gaining strength in the electorate. Even if marginal, this new trend in Swiss politics seems to be sustained by the high importance attributed to the environmental issue by Swiss public opinion. The result of the *Isopublic survey* conducted in October 1987 on a sample of 1,000 Swiss citizens, from 15 to 74 years of age, found that 78 per cent mentioned environment as their major preoccupation followed by drugs (63%) and energy supply (53%). As a consequence of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and the Swiss chemical accident called Tchernobale, many political observers relying on public polls predicted a big wave of support for the Greens and even a tidal wave.

Following this general trend, political parties adapted their programmes accordingly. The SPS took a stand against nuclear energy and envisaged different measures in order to reduce the energy

consumption and to improve security; it was in favour of clean and renewable energy sources, and strongly in favour of policies protecting the environment. In fact, the party leaders felt that the main threat could come from their potential allies, ecologist and progressive parties.

Two other governmental parties, FDP (Radical) and CVP (Christian-Democrats) took a more *nuancée* position. The CVP rejected new nuclear plants, but was not willing to abandon the existing ones. It proclaimed the principle polluter-payer and advocated more environmental protection. The FDP acknowledged that it is impossible to give up nuclear energy but argued for more security. The Liberal Party admitted that this is the risk inherent with industrial civilization but supported the necessity of studying different scenarios and introducing more diversification of supply sources. On the other extreme, the Communists are in favour of a moratorium, the Independents ask for a gradual abandonment of nuclear energy while ecologists and progressive organizations are against nuclear plants.

Another problem is becoming a major political issue: Switzerland's EEC relations. But on this point, the parties remained rather quiet or very cautious. In general, they admitted, as in the case of FDP, CVP and Liberals, the necessity of collaboration with the EEC in order to avoid an isolation of the country from the unified European market in 1992. In contrast with the environment and nuclear plant issue, the EEC was not a major theme of the electoral campaign mainly because it was judged rather premature for public debate.

The Outcome

Contrary to the forecasts that announced substantial changes in the 18 October 1987 federal elections, the general outcome confirmed the traditional behaviour of the Swiss electorate which is characterized by a remarkable stability with two exceptions: (a) the loss of 4.4 per cent of the votes and of 6 seats suffered by the Swiss Social Democrats which reduced their support to 18.4 per cent and their seats to 41. Once Switzerland's largest party, it is now the third political force behind its governmental allies, the Radical and the Christian Democratic parties; (b) the strengthening of the Greens or the Swiss ecological party which reached almost 5 per cent of the votes in 1987 becoming the fifth party with the same number of seats (9) as the Liberal Party. By no means was there any tidal wave of the kind predicted by some surveys and journalists.

The general picture of great electoral stability with some fluctuations appears clearly from the

outcome of elections between 1939 and 1983. Socialist votes were fluctuating between a minimum of 22.8 in 1971 and 1983 and a maximum of 28.6 in 1943; the Radicals between 20.8 in 1939 and 24.1 in 1979; the Christian Democrats between 17.0 in 1939—much below the next minimum of 20.8 in 1943—and 23.4 in 1963; the People's Party between 9.9 in 1975 and 12.6 in 1951 with a peak of 14.7 in 1939.

The 1987 elections resulted in reduced support for governmental parties. The Radical Party lost 0.5 per cent of votes which resulted in a more important loss of 3 seats in the National Council. While the Christian Democrats registered a slightly larger loss in votes (0.6%) but obtained an equal number of 42 seats. With 22.9 per cent of the votes and 51 seats, the Radicals remained the biggest Swiss party, followed by Christian Democrats and Socialists with 18.4 per cent of the votes and 41 seats. In the fourth position, the People's Party was the only governmental party which succeeded in limiting its losses in votes to 0.1 per cent and in obtaining two additional seats, 25 instead of 23 in the previous Assembly (see Table 1).

Notwithstanding the governmental parties' losses in votes and seats, the four parties which participate in the Federal Council's 'magic formula' (2+2+2+1) since 1959 account for 72.3 per cent of votes in the 1987 election and for 79.5 per cent of the seats in the National Council. With this high support, the Swiss federal government founded on the co-operation of the four major parties is the guarantee of governmental stability and continuity which is counter-balanced to some degree by the use of referendums and initiatives.

Principal Losers

Socialist Party. As pointed out, the main loser was the Socialist Party which registered its worst score since 1939. After its peak in 1943, it preserved a good position in five following elections (26.2–27.0%) before declining to 23.5 in 1967 and 22.8 in 1971. Since 1975, the fluctuations were replaced by a declining trend in votes and seats (see Tables 2–3). Among various explanations advanced in the context of its recent defeat, was reference to the image of a divided party which was caused by the discussion within the party about its continued participation in government. This public debate took place at the 1984 Party Congress which decided to pursue governmental participation. Some socialist leaders also regret that the SPS had not played its trump card: its positive image with regard to social policy (pension fund, old people), a domain in which the SPS was ranked number one by public polls in

TABLE 1. Distribution of votes and seats in the National Council elections of 1987 and 1983

	Votes		Seats (200)	
	1987	1983	1987	1983
Radical Democratic Party (FDP)	22.9	23.4	51	54
Christian Democrat Party/ Christian Social Party (CVP)	20.0	20.6	42	42
Swiss Socialist Party (SPS)	18.4	22.8	41	47
People's Party (SVP)	11.0	11.1	25	23
Alliance of Independents (LdU)	4.2	4.0	9	9
Swiss Liberal Party (LPS)	2.7	2.8	9	8
Evangelist Party (EVP)	1.9	2.1	3	3
National Action, incl. Vigilance in Geneva (NA)	2.9	3.5	3	5
Labour Party (Communists) PdA	0.8	0.9	1	1
POCH/Green Alternative (alliance of extreme left and ecologists)	3.5	3.5	5	4
Green Swiss Party (GPS)	4.8	2.9	9	4
Others	6.8	2.5	2	—

TABLE 2. Distribution of votes: 4 governmental parties 1975-87 (%)

	1975	1979	1983	1987	1975-87
SPS	24.9	24.6	22.8	18.4	-6.5
FDP	22.2	24.1	23.4	22.9	+0.7
CVP	21.1	21.5	20.6	20.0	-1.1
	68.2	70.2	66.8	61.3	-6.9
SVP	9.9	11.6	11.1	11.0	+1.1
Total	78.1	81.8	77.9	72.3	-5.8
LPS	2.4	2.8	2.8	2.7	+0.3
	80.5	84.6	80.7	75.0	-5.5

TABLE 3. Seats in National Council: 4 governmental parties 1975-87

	1975	1979	1983	1987	1975-87
SPS	55	51	47	41	-14
FDP	47	51	54	51	+4
CVP	46	44	42	42	-4
	148	146	143	134	-14
SVP	21	23	23	25	+4
	169	169	166	159	-10
LPS	6	8	8	9	+3
	175	177	174	168	-7

1987. Instead, the SPS developed a campaign more oriented toward environmental issues and alliances in some instances with the Ecologists or extreme left parties. In a few cases, the results of this new orientation were positive, as in the case of Vaud and Schwyz where the Socialists gained one seat supporting each of these cantons. In Geneva, Christiane Brunner, secretary of the Public Service Trade Union, lost her seat in favour of Jean Ziegler, university professor and ecologist. The same fate was reserved, in Zurich, for Walter Renschler, central secretary of the Swiss Public Service Trade Union. The SPS lost some of its Trade Union leaders and did not succeed in placing new ones with the exception of an ecologically minded transport trade unionist in Vaud. The SPS becomes greener but also weaker.

What explains the reduced presence of trade union leaders among socialist representatives in Berne? A growing part of the socialist electorate giving priority to environmental issues or the strategy of alliances which often favoured the extreme left or Ecologist allies? Or can it be attributed to structural changes such as a population trend from cities to rural areas which could disadvantage the socialist electorate? In some cities, the SPS's weakness resulted from the lack of personalities, like in Zurich where Socialists lost 6.4 per cent of votes and 2 seats. Many factors converge in explaining the SPS decline, among others, the fact that the Greens prosper, as in the German Federal Republic at the expense of Socialists. Finally, it is obvious that the German speaking part and the French one witnessed opposite outcomes: the Socialists gained one seat in Vaud, whilst there were 6 losses and one gain on the German-speaking side.

Radical Party. The Radical Party offered better resistance to the erosive trend. Its slight losses in votes were nevertheless reflected in the loss of three seats: one in Zurich, to the SVP, one in St-Gall which corresponds to one seat gained by CVP, and one in Vaud won by a Socialist. On the whole, the FDP maintained its position with the support of its traditional electorate. This corresponds to its image of a governmental party, especially competent in economic, financial energy and transport policies, matters for which it is ranked first by public polls.³

National Action. Among minor parties, National Action (NA) is the only loser in both votes and seats: one seat lost in Berne was probably compensated by a newcomer representing a new 'automobilist' party. In Geneva, the Vigilance lost the seat occupied by its veteran leader Mario Soldini. The NA, ally of the Republican Movement, emerged in connection with the Schwarzenbach initiative in 1970 with the

purpose of limiting 'foreign penetration' in Switzerland. The REP and NA succeeded in attracting widespread support for this initiative which, despite strong opposition from the major parties, was endorsed by 46 per cent of the voters. Despite this success, they failed to transform it into a comparable electoral victory. This disparity confirmed the difference in vote on an initiative or on a single issue and the vote in general elections. The Republicans virtually disappeared following the retirement of their leader, James Schwarzenbach, in December 1978. The electorate of the NA was eroded, reaching 2.9 per cent in 1987, due mainly to the satisfactory solution of the foreign workers problem.⁴

Status quo Parties

CVP and Independents, as well as two minor parties (EVP and PdA) succeeded in holding on to the same level of representation.

The CVP can rely on electoral fortresses in some Catholic cantons like St-Gall, Lucerne, Ticino and Valais, and its loyal traditional voters. In general, the CVP enjoys a rather good image but occupies a prominent position only in the domain of mass media policy.

The Independents which became greener, the EVP and PdA (with one MP in Geneva) registered no change at all.

Winners

Among the winners figures the Swiss ecologist party which more than doubled its representation with 4.8 per cent (2.9 in 1983) of votes and 9 seats (see Table 4).

In 1979, the Greens emerged in Vaud, where they obtained 6.4 per cent of votes. In 1983, they gained strength in their canton of origin (7.0%) and emerged in five other cantons: 7.6 per cent in Geneva, 7.4 per cent in Neuchâtel, 6.3 per cent in Berne, 5.9 per cent in Thurgau and 4.2 per cent in Zurich. 1987 was the year of success but not to the extent that had been forecast before the elections. In total, the Greens increased by 2 points their share of the votes. The Greens obtained 11.6 per cent in Geneva, 10.8 per cent in Thurgau, 9.2 per cent in Berne, 8.4 per cent in Vaud and 6.9 per cent in Basle-country. They

TABLE 4. Ecologists/Greens distribution of votes 1979-87 (%)

1979	1983	1987	1979-87
0.8	2.9	4.8	+4
2	4	9	+7

registered a slight decline of votes in Neuchâtel with 7.0 per cent, but emerged in Zug with 4.2 per cent and with less than 2 per cent in Ticino, Valais and Basle-City. In general, they obtained support in industrial cantons or in those where nuclear plants were established or planned. The fight against the Verbois project for the construction of a nuclear plant on the exiguous territory of Geneva, in 1970, and the present reaction to the threat coming from the French Super Phenix situated 60 kms from Geneva, explain the popularity of the Ecologists in Geneva.

Even so the victory of the party which represents the protection of nature in public opinion was less massive than predicted. This result is due to different factors: first of all, the weight and solidity of the main traditional parties which manage to assimilate some ecologist arguments and to count some ecologists among their candidates and representatives. Moreover, the electoral choice is a multi-dimensional choice which is not based essentially on one dimension. Finally, if the credibility of the Green leaders is well established in environmental matters, it is more questionable in traditional domains such as economic and social policy. This is at least what is indicated by recent public opinion polls.

The Greens' breakthrough on the whole appears rather modest even if two seats won by the 'green alternative' are added to their 9.

In contrast to the green wave, there is a timid appearance of its counterpart, the 'automobile party' in Zurich (1) and Berne (1). On the left, POCH won one seat in Basle-country, while on the right, Liberals won one seat. The surprise came from the traditional People's Party. Despite a Berne financial scandal and some forecasts, the SVP not only succeeded in maintaining its position in Berne it even increased its total number of seats from 23 to 25.

Council of States' Outcomes

The stability of party representation in the Council of States is reconfirmed by 1987 elections. The Upper Chamber, which shares legisla-

tive power with the National Council, remains heavily dominated by coalitions of bourgeois parties in most cantons. The right and centre right hold altogether 40 of the 46 seats and the governmental parties completely dominate the Council of States (see Table 5).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we observe that, despite some changes due to gains obtained by minor parties, the opposition is still weak in Switzerland. Its potential consists altogether of 31 seats and about 26 per cent of the votes in the National Council, and is completely absent from the Council of States. This is one of the distinctive features of the consensus-based Swiss political system.

The strength of the 'bourgeois' bloc (FDP + CVP + SVP + LP) remained on the whole unchanged with 127 seats (63.5% of 200 seats) and 56.6 per cent of votes. Yet the left-right dimension is present, the losses of the Socialists being compensated by the gains of the Greens and extreme left. In general, this distribution on the left-right scale reflects roughly the picture of the Swiss electorate: 23 per cent on the left, 42 in the centre and 34 on the right.⁵

Despite this apparently unchanged picture, the environmental issue introduced a new cleavage which cuts across the main parties. In fact, some parties are becoming greener, such as the Independents and the Socialists, while in some other parties the number of Green representatives has increased, as, for example, among Radicals and Christian Democrats. If the National Council is more green, the Council of States is more traditional. The trend in the Popular Chamber appears to be counterbalanced by the conservatism of the States' Chamber.

Surprisingly, the proportion of newly elected members is much higher in the Council of States than in the National Council: somewhat more than a third with 70 newcomers in the National Council, compared to almost a half with 22 newly elected state councillors. More than a half of National councillors have a university degree

TABLE 5. Distribution of seats in the Council of States by party 1975-87

	FDP	CVP	SPS	SVP	LPS	LDU	Total
1975	15	17	5	5	1	1	44
1979	11	18	9	5	3	0	46*
1983	14	18	6	5	3	0	46
1987	14	19	5	4	3	1	46
Change 1975-87	-1	+2	0	-1	+2	0	

* New canton of Jura included.

compared to three-quarters of the State councillors. As usual jurists are dominant with 35 (18%) in National Council and 22 (48%) in Council of States. Despite some better representation of women, they are still highly under-represented in both Chambers with 27 and 5 respectively. Even with one woman member of Federal Council, Swiss politics remains predominantly a matter for men.

Finally, with party discipline not being a distinctive feature of Swiss parties, the new legislature's performance will depend heavily on representatives' personal choices when it comes to making decisions on issues, such as energy, environment and the European Community.

Notes and References

1. *An Eight Nations Study*, 1973-1976, (Cologne: Central-Archive, University of Cologne, 1979), p. 163.
2. According to Jacques Nicola ('L'abstentionisme en Suisse' in Sidjanski and others,

Les Suisses et la Politique, (Berne: H. Lang, 1975), p. 194, abstention of male voters had a mildly adverse effect on the left and the Independent party in 1971, while the abstention of women damaged the left and, to a lesser degree, the Radical and Liberal parties. The gap between men and women diminished in the 1975 election:

Participation in the federal elections 1971 and 1975 by sex

	1971	1975
Men	72	61
Women	49	46
Men + Women	60	53

Swiss Surveys 1972 and 1976, Department of Political Science, University of Geneva.

3. Univox, Berne University, June 1987.
4. D. Sidjanski, 'Turnout, Stability and Left-Right Dimension' in *Switzerland at the Polls. The National Elections of 1979*, Howard R. Penniman (editor), p. 113.
5. *An Eight Nations Study*, op. cit., p. 36.

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