

The Politics of Switzerland

Continuity and Change
in a Consensus Democracy

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5 | *The Swiss system of government*

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the Swiss system of government and its two branches, the legislative and the executive. We will first present the structure and functioning of the Federal Parliament before having a closer look at the Federal Council, the executive body of the Confederation. This will be followed by a discussion of the relationship between the two and the current problems they are facing. We will conclude this chapter with an assessment of possible options for reforming the Swiss system of government.

5.2 The Federal Parliament

In chapter 3 the reader was provided with the most basic information concerning the set-up of the Federal Parliament. In this chapter we go further and present a more detailed picture of the Swiss Parliament's structure and role. The Federal Parliament is the highest authority of the Confederation, subject to the rights of the people and the cantons.¹ In academic literature, a classic distinction is made between parliaments of work and parliaments of debate. While the latter could characterize the British House of Commons, where major political decisions are taken following plenary discussions, the Swiss Parliament clearly belongs to the first category: it is a parliament of work; the bulk of work is undertaken within committees, outside the plenary chamber (Linder 1999: 195; Ochsner 1987). Other chief examples of parliaments of work include the US Congress and the European Parliament. According to Lüthi (1987: 88), Swiss MPs spend more than 70 per cent of their time working for parliamentary committees.²

¹ Article 148.1 Federal Constitution.

² Each chamber has 12 identical committees (10 legislative committees and 2 control committees). Committees of the National Council are composed of 25

The Federal Parliament is neither a permanent nor a professional body. In 1848, a very lean parliamentary model was adopted according to which MPs only meet in the plenary assembly for four three-week long sessions per year. Until recently, the majority of MPs were unpaid³ ‘amateur politicians’, dedicating most of their time to their main professions. A recent study shows that among parliaments in countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Swiss Parliament has the second lowest value of an index of parliamentary professionalism (Z’graggen and Linder 2004: 18). At the same time, as this study reveals, the functioning of the Swiss Parliament is cheap: the annual costs for the Swiss Parliament are the lowest among the OECD countries considered. This model tenaciously survived all major attempts aiming at the establishment of a more permanent and professional parliament, as present in most modern, liberal democracies. Despite the absence of structural changes, MPs became more and more professional over time. According to Riklin and Möckli (1991), MPs dedicate about half of their time to the Federal Parliament. Other political activities take up an additional 10 per cent of their time. The study by Z’graggen and Linder (2004) shows that, today, Swiss MPs spend more time on their parliamentary work than their Austrian, Belgian, Luxembourgish, Norwegian, Portuguese and Spanish counterparts. The Swiss Parliament could therefore be best characterized as ‘semi-professional’. One should note, however, that this apparent increase in professionalism (when measured by the time spent by MPs on parliamentary work) stands in sharp contrast to the structural weakness of the parliamentary administration. In the OECD, on average, there are 3.5 collaborators per MP. In Switzerland, this ratio is by far the weakest, as there are only 0.6 collaborators per MP (Z’graggen and Linder 2004: 54). Today, a large majority of MPs clearly favour a structural reinforcement of the administrative, technical and professional

members, while those of the Council of States count 13 members each. In addition, there are a number of special committees, common to both chambers. Three committees are clearly more important than the others: the Foreign Affairs Committee; the Committee for Economic Affairs and Taxation; and the Finance Committee (Kriesi 1998a : 184).

³ MPs do not receive any salary for their parliamentary work, although they do receive compensation for their expenses.

resources at their disposal (Krüger *et al.* 2001). However, Swiss voters do not desire costly reforms of Parliament: in 1992, they turned down such a proposal. That same day, only the proposal changing the structure of parliamentary committees was approved at the polls. As a consequence, the Federal Assembly as a whole lacks time, information and professional competence and is consistently disadvantaged compared with the government and the federal administration.

Not surprisingly, such a structural weakness renders MPs more dependent on know-how generated by alternative societal and economic structures, ultimately making Parliament more permeable to the influence of interest associations and private interests. Studies have shown that 31 per cent of all MPs actively represent the interests of trade unions, farmers' associations and employers' associations (Kerr 1981). The lobbying efforts of businesses are equally – and increasingly – visible: at the end of the 1980s, MPs on average held approximately six seats on executive boards of private companies (Hug 1989: 85). Another effect of the particular parliamentary structure is the overrepresentation of certain professions among MPs, such as attorneys, businessmen, medical doctors, university professors but also farmers.

Despite this structural weakness, the Federal Parliament fulfils, as do other parliaments, a number of important functions. The *elective function* of the Swiss Parliament is, at first sight, rather strong. Indeed, the Federal Assembly elects the seven members of the Federal Council, the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor of the Confederation, judges of the Federal Courts and, in times of war, the General of the Army. As Germann (1996: 229) points out, however, the elective function of the Federal Assembly is somewhat 'atrophied' due to the limited political choice it is given when electing the government. Important informal constraints, such as the 'magic formula' (see below) according to which the partisan composition of the government is fixed, as well as the need for linguistic, religious and, to a lesser extent, gender proportionality, leave the Federal Assembly a very limited choice when it comes to the election of members of the government. Very recently, the elective function of the Swiss Parliament has, however, been reinforced. As a result of the important changes in the structure of the party system (chapter 6), the Federal Assembly in 2003 did not re-elect one of the incumbent Federal Councillors. By doing so, it changed

the pattern of partisan forces within government, further (though only temporarily⁴) increased the gender gap within the Federal Council and for the first time elected two Federal Councillors from the same canton (i.e. Zurich).

Second, the *recruitment function* of the Federal Assembly is not as strong as in the UK, where (almost) every member of the cabinet is an elected MP, but it is stronger than in the USA, where only a minority of ‘ministers’ (i.e. members of the President’s cabinet) have previously been members of Congress. However, among the twenty-eight Federal Councillors elected since 1970, only four have never held a parliamentary seat at the federal level prior to their election into government.⁵ For members of government, previous experience within the Federal Parliament is therefore a quasi-necessary condition for being elected to the Federal Council.

Third, the *legislative function* of the Federal Parliament is weaker than in most other liberal democracies, and this is not only due to the constraints imposed by direct democracy (see chapters 4 and 8). As we shall see in more detail in chapter 8, although both chambers of the Federal Parliament can initiate legislation, their agenda-setting role within the decision-making process strongly decreased during the 1990s (Sciarini *et al.* 2002: 11). Also, according to a study by Kriesi (1980), the political elite consider the parliamentary stage to be less important than earlier stages in the legislative decision-making process. A newer study, however, shows that Parliament increasingly modifies drafts of legislation prepared by the government (Jegher and Linder 1998: 90). In addition, the study shows that the magnitude of these modifications has slightly increased. With one out of two governmental drafts modified by the federal chambers and with these modifications being more sustained, the authors conclude that the traditional view of a weak and destitute Federal Parliament is not appropriate. They agree with Lijphart who, in his international comparison, described the

⁴ On 14 June 2006, Ruth Leuthard was elected into the Federal Council, replacing Joseph Deiss.

⁵ The four exceptions are Ruth Dreifuss, Ruth Metzler-Arnold, Micheline Calmy-Rey and Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, i.e. four out of only five women that have ever held a mandate within the Federal Council. Thus, while male members of the government have held previous parliamentary mandates at the federal level, their female counterparts are recruited predominantly from the extra-parliamentary arena.

Federal Assembly as the ‘second most powerful legislature’ (Lijphart 1984: 79).

Fourth, the Federal Parliament exerts a *control function* over the government and its administration. Though MPs elect the government, they lack the possibility to dismiss the latter *in corpore* and Parliament cannot impeach or recall individual members of the Federal Council. Despite this structural lack of control, Parliament has a number of instruments at its disposal allowing it to monitor and, if necessary, sanction the government and the administration. MPs can check on governmental activities by means of questions, interpellations and hearings, or through the intervention of two permanent supervisory committees common to both chambers which specifically control executive, administrative and judicial activities.⁶ In exceptionally important and obscure cases on which light needs to be shed, the two chambers can set up a common Parliamentary Commission of Investigation (PCI). So far, such a PCI has only been formed on four occasions,⁷ although each time notable weaknesses have been revealed within the system of parliamentary control mechanisms and control processes among the state organs in general.

On the whole, when estimating the importance of Parliament by having a closer look at its various functions, most observers come to the conclusion that the Swiss legislature is very weak. According to traditional views, its elective function has been limited, its recruitment function has been weaker than in parliamentary systems, its legislative function has been severely hampered by both direct democracy and structural limitations, and its control function has been comparatively narrow in scope. Recent contributions nuance this weakness somewhat. In the light of new developments, it can be argued that in the absence of structural reforms, the Federal Assembly has initiated a *process of emancipation*. This process is linked to the profound changes in

⁶ The Finance Committee supervises the financial management of the federal state, while the Control Committee exerts the ‘high supervision’ over the activities of the Federal Council, the federal administration, the federal courts and other organs entrusted with tasks of the federal state (Article 169 Federal Constitution).

⁷ These PCIs were formed in the context of the scandal of the ‘Mirage’ fighter planes (1964), the scandal concerning the secret police, its filing methods and the functioning of the Federal Department for Defence (in this case, two PCIs were created: one in 1989 and the second one a year later) and in the context of a scandal surrounding the Federal Pension Fund (1996).

the party system that have occurred since the 1990s (chapter 6), leading to more competitive, polarized and confrontational politics within the Swiss legislature. This manifests itself in narrow parliamentary majorities that have succeeded in departing from informal rules that were set in stone for decades (such as the partisan composition of government), in the choice of the vast majority of Federal Councillors within its own ranks, and in the more frequent and profound amendments by Parliament of governmental proposals. However, this parliamentary emancipation varies across policy fields. In certain areas, the impact of internationalization seriously weakens Parliament while at the same time reinforcing the government (Fischer *et al.* 2002). In other policy fields, such as social policy, Häusermann *et al.* (2004) were able to show that the role of Parliament has become more proactive in the most recent past (chapter 8).

The changing partisan landscape also affects the party discipline of MPs. In the literature, and in comparison to the situation in other liberal democracies, party discipline among Swiss MPs has been presented as ‘moderate’, injecting uncertainty into the relationship between the government and the Parliament (Papadopoulos 1997: 101). Factors that contribute to the relative intra-partisan fragmentation include the Federal Constitution’s provision for MPs to vote without instructions;⁸ the overall fragmentation of the party system across levels of government (chapter 6); the possibility for MPs to rely on non-partisan resources for their election; and the political culture within government, allowing Federal Councillors to deviate from their party line for the sake of collegiality. However, more recent trends show that, among the two largest political parties, the Swiss People’s Party and the Socialist Party, party discipline has greatly increased.⁹ This strengthening of party discipline among the two largest partisan competitors in Parliament does not necessarily reduce the systemic uncertainty in the relationship between the government and Parliament. However, it does strengthen partisan competition within Parliament. With this competition becoming more fervent, the overall attention of the media, the general public and the government to the parliamentary arena increases. Thus, it can be hypothesized that such developments strengthen rather

⁸ Article 161.1 Federal Constitution.

⁹ See the article ‘Die SVP setzt sich rechts von FDP und CVP ab’ by Michael Hermann and Heiri Leuthold in the newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* of 11 October 2003, available at <http://sotomo.geo.unizh.ch/papers/parlaKarte.99-03.pdf> – accessed on 9 July 2007.

than weaken Parliament's position within the political system. In the light of the foregoing considerations, we would argue that – overall – a process of emancipation of Parliament can be detected. However, it is necessary to add a caveat: this emancipation process started at a very low level of parliamentary power and importance within the Swiss political system. Before one can conclude that Switzerland has a strong parliament, there is still a long way to go.

5.3 The Federal Council

The Federal Constitution of 1848 created a seven-member body, the Federal Council. It is the highest governing and executive authority of the federal state.¹⁰ Its classification into any of the traditional categories of governmental systems is challenging and scholars situate the Swiss case somewhere between the two most common forms of democratic government, the parliamentary and the presidential systems (Lijphart 1999: 119ff.). Unlike the case of parliamentary systems, the legislative body in Switzerland cannot recall the executive and, *vice versa*, the Parliament cannot be dissolved by the Federal Council. Also, unlike the case of a presidential system, the members of the Federal Council are not elected by the people – or by a specifically elected college – but by Parliament. Other observers have therefore come to believe that the Swiss system corresponds to a distinct, third type of government: the directorial system (Lauvaux 1990; Fleiner-Gerster 1987). First put in place in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the *Directoire* lasted for only four years. It was a collegial executive body, elected by Parliament but which, once elected, remained independent from the legislative body. The formal functions of the Federal Council are enumerated in the legislation and include the function of governing the country, participating in the legislative process, leading the federal administration, implementing federal policies and, finally, communicating with and informing the public (Klöti 2007: 147).

The Swiss directorial system is characterized by two constitutional principles, the principle of *non-hierarchy* and the principle of *non-responsibility*. The principle of *non-hierarchy* assigns the same power to each one of the seven members of the Federal Council, with the exception of the President of the Confederation. This presidency, however, is assigned a purely representative and ceremonial function.

¹⁰ Article 174 Federal Constitution.

Therefore, among the Federal Councillors, the President is merely a *primus inter pares*. The presidency rotates every year among the members of the Federal Council and entails no further political power. All members of government are confronted by a double task: they have to actively participate in the elaboration of governmental decisions and, at the same time, they must lead one of the seven federal ministries ('departments' in the Swiss nomenclature). These double hats worn by each member of government lead to a fusion of executive powers within the Federal Council, strengthening the latter's position in the political system. The principle of non-hierarchy also expresses itself through the collegial decision making within the Federal Council. Once a decision is taken by the government, every Federal Councillor defends this decision, even if he or she may have initially opposed it.

The second constitutionally embedded principle of the Swiss governmental system, the principle of *non-responsibility*, concerns the independence of the Federal Council with respect to Parliament. As we have seen, all members of government are elected by the Federal Assembly for the duration of an entire legislature, lasting four years. Once in office, however, Parliament has no possibility to recall the Federal Council.

A third specificity of the directorial system of government has emerged over the last decades: the principle of *concordance*. According to this principle, which is not constitutionally founded but derives from purely informal practices, the most important political parties are co-opted into government and remain in the executive on a permanent basis. While such 'oversized cabinets' or 'grand coalitions' containing one or more 'unnecessary parties' (Lijphart 1984: 60) exist elsewhere, the Swiss case represents its most radical and – simultaneously – most stable form. Since 1959, the partisan composition of the Federal Council has remained identical. Four parties, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats and the Swiss People's Party, have shared – and still share – executive responsibilities within the Federal Council. On average, these four coalition partners could (numerically) count on the support of 83 per cent of the MPs in the chamber representing the people, the National Council, and this has never fallen below 74 per cent (in 1991). Even the formula according to which the seven governmental seats are distributed among these four parties remained exactly the same between 1959 and 2003: the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats had two seats each, while the Swiss People's Party was represented by one Federal

Councillor. In the literature, that specific arrangement is referred to as the ‘magic formula’ – magic, as Parliament did not alter the formula for forty-four years, an exceptional occurrence among modern democracies. It is only in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections of 2003 that one of the incumbent members of government, the Christian Democrat Ruth Metzler, was successfully ousted. Instead of being re-elected, Metzler had to cede her seat to Christoph Blocher, the polarizing figurehead of the Swiss People’s Party. With Blocher’s election to the Federal Council, a new and politically significant chapter has been written in the governmental set-up of Switzerland (chapter 6).

This partisan heterogeneity did not appear abruptly but rather arose gradually over decades. Indeed, between 1848 and 1891, the federal government was in the firm hands of the winners of the civil war, the Liberals. This movement (later a political party) took over governmental responsibilities, backed by a solid majority in Parliament. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, their major competitors, the Catholic Conservatives (later to become the Christian Democrats), opposed the Liberals in the arena of direct democracy. The successful launching of optional referendums and victories at the polls, particularly between 1874 and 1884 (Bolliger and Zürcher 2004: 65ff.), led to a blockage of policy making that was consequently resolved through a process of *rapprochement* between the ruling elite and their opposition. Ultimately, the formal co-optation of the latter was accomplished by the election of the Catholic Conservative MP Josef Zemp to the Federal Council. In 1919, the Christian Democrats acquired a second seat, and the predecessor of the Swiss People’s Party was given a seat in 1928. In 1943, the Social Democrats obtained their first seat in the federal government, with a second seat to follow in 1959. Finally, as mentioned before, the Swiss People’s Party succeeded in taking one of the Christian Democrats seats away in 2003.

According to Neidhart (1970), the governmental heterogeneity in terms of its partisan composition can be seen as a result of direct democracy. The logic behind this thesis is that all political parties capable of successfully launching a referendum have been progressively integrated into the federal government, neutralizing their systematic opposition in the direct democracy arena. Political truce, according to Neidhart, is therefore a direct result of the elite’s strategy to co-opt parties into government, conferring on them responsibilities in the elaboration of governmental policies. Neidhart’s mono-causal theory has been criticized by several commentators, as it cannot account for the appearance of

co-optation mechanisms in countries – especially in small polities – where the referendum threat is absent, e.g. in Austria. Alternative factors have undoubtedly contributed to the establishment of proportional governments in several smaller European countries: Lijphart (1984 and 1999) emphasizes cultural divisions as an explanatory factor, while Katzenstein (1985) stresses the small countries' exposure to international market competition, inducing the elites to engage in co-optation processes in order to strengthen these countries' positions within world markets.

Neidhart's theory also neglects additional constraints and incentives that proved to be of importance in the progressive co-optation process of the four governmental parties in Switzerland. In particular, the integration of the Social Democrats into the Federal Council did not follow the logic of the referendum threat. In 1929, influenced by governmental experiences of Social Democrats in other countries and at the cantonal and communal levels in Switzerland, the Social Democrats officially abandoned their rigid opposition policy. They accepted and recognized the minority status of the political left and declared themselves ready to share governmental responsibilities at the federal level. When this proposed co-optation was refused by the governmental parties, the Social Democrats reverted to their strategy of opposition, particularly through the use of direct democracy. This strategy failed, however, with the refusal of a popular initiative in 1935. At the same time, the rise of fascism posed an ever growing threat to European democracies, and produced a moderating impact on the Social Democrats' party programme, thereby making their claim for integration into the federal government more acceptable. But it was not until the crucial juncture in World War II during the winter of 1942/3 – the Germans' defeat in the battle of Stalingrad – that the governing parties reassessed their perception of the Social Democrats and finally granted them a seat in the Federal Council in 1943. Notably, the governing parties' indulgence was facilitated by the fact that most of the other countries not occupied by the Axis Forces (e.g. the UK) were governed by grand coalitions, including Social Democrats. After a six-year absence from government (1953–9), the Social Democrats were finally granted two seats in the Federal Council, marking the birth of the 'magic formula'.

In short, the progressive co-optation of the main political forces into the federal government was only partly due to the referendum threat, as institutional constraints and strategic incentives played an

additional major role. Thus, the grand coalition in Switzerland was not the product of an automatic institutional mechanism but above all a conscious strategy of the dominant political elite. Moreover, the *effects* of this co-optation were rather weak. Therefore, the degree of conflict at the polls did not immediately decrease after the election of the Catholic Josef Zemp to the Federal Council in 1891. As Bolliger and Zürcher (2004) show, the Catholic Conservatives were even able to increase their successes in the six years that followed their co-optation. It was only at the very end of the nineteenth century that the direct-democratic opposition of the Catholic Conservatives ebbed away, a process which was, however, only minimally affected by the 1891 co-optation. More recently, the directly democratic ‘sectoral opposition’ – led or backed especially by the Social Democrats and the Swiss People’s Party – also puts a question mark over the grand coalition’s ability to absorb political conflict (Germann 1996: 23f.). Similar findings are provided by empirically grounded studies at the cantonal level. They show that the degree of concordance neither decreases the referendum and initiative frequencies nor strengthens the governmental coalitions’ success in popular votes (Trechsel 2000; Barankay *et al.* 2003).¹¹

In addition to the partisan composition of the grand coalition, a number of other social and political dimensions *increase* the heterogeneity of the Federal Council. First, the Swiss government has always been a multilingual body with at least one representative coming from a French-speaking (or from the Italian-speaking) canton.¹² Second, when electing the federal government, Parliament observes an unwritten rule according to which the two major confessions, Protestantism and Catholicism, have to be represented within the Federal Council. Third, the three largest cantons have (almost) constantly held a seat in government. Finally, although the representation of women is neither a written nor a fundamental principle, it has become improbable – not to say impossible – for Parliament to elect an exclusively male government.¹³

¹¹ Note, however, that Vatter (2002) finds a more frequent use of direct democracy in cantons with lower levels of concordance.

¹² This was an unwritten rule for over 150 years. The Federal Constitution of 1999 now consecrates the Federal Council’s adequate regional and linguistic representation in Article 174.4 Federal Constitution.

¹³ Women are in a clear minority position in the Federal Assembly (Lüthi 2007: 137). In 2007, the voters elected 59 women (29.5 per cent) to the National

However, the heterogeneity of the Federal Council must be put in perspective. Two factors somewhat counterbalance these formal and informal mechanisms governing the selection process of Federal Councillors. First, the members of government are individually elected by the Federal Assembly, meaning that each Councillor has been given the confidence of a majority of MPs. For this to become possible, parties must find compromises in multilateral negotiations among parliamentary factions. This also means that moderate candidates tend to be more acceptable to Parliament than more polarizing ones, leading to a Federal Council that is ideologically less divided than one may expect it to be. Second, due to the low turnover of Federal Councillors,¹⁴ coupled with the principle of collegial decision making, a mutual socialization process among Federal Councillors takes place. This process is conducive to the emergence of reciprocal respect, solidarity and loyalty among the members of government, further limiting the college's heterogeneity.

Overall, the Federal Council occupies an *important position in the Swiss political system*. As mentioned earlier, the government was designed in a way that led to a fusion of power in the hands of each Federal Councillor. Its individual and collective independence from Parliament, the strong governmental stability in partisan terms and the rather weak mechanisms for controlling its activities are features that strengthen the Federal Council's position in the political process. However, a number of factors limit the college's power. First, direct democracy severely reduces the scope of governmental autonomy. Although the Federal Council exerts a certain influence on the direct-democratic process, popular votes generate a structural uncertainty as well as, at times, (bitter) defeats of governmental policies (chapter 3). Second, the Federal Council cannot govern by decree. Similarly to the German system of administrative jurisdiction, the government's actions must rely on a legal basis, with the exception of emergency situations in which urgent decrees are permitted (Fleiner-Gerster 1987). Third, the collegial decision making limits the power of the government insofar as the political responsibility of a Federal Councillor is diluted within the college as a whole. Hence, one may argue that in a system where no one is

Council and 10 women (21.7 per cent) to the Council of States. Since December 2007, for the first time, three out of seven Federal Councillors are women.

¹⁴ On average, the Councillors of the twentieth century who did not die in office spent 9.5 years in the Federal Council.

directly responsible for a given policy, no one effectively holds political power. Finally, and paradoxically, the fusion of executive power limits the power of the Federal Council, as it leads to a work overload for its members, preventing them from spending adequate time on substantial governmental activities. This overload therefore precludes the government from making effective use of its political power, leading to a strengthening of the federal administration.

Following up on this last point, the dependency of the government on its bureaucracy becomes visible at several points in the decision-making process (see also chapter 8). The federal administration plays an important role in the preparation of governmental projects by formulating legislative proposals, participating in expert committees, interpreting consultation procedures and writing governmental messages to Parliament. In policy implementation, the federal administration plays the predominant role as it implements and coordinates practically all federal policies.

5.4 The future of the Swiss system of government

Among modern democratic polities, the stability of the Swiss system of government is exceptionally robust. Despite its legendary stability, more recent developments have put this particular set-up under severe pressure. To start with, its *efficiency* is increasingly being questioned. As we have seen – and despite a tendency towards political emancipation – the Federal Assembly remains a weak organ, both from a resource perspective, and from the standpoint of its overall position within the political process. In the recent past, only limited reforms (particularly the structural remodelling of the parliamentary committees) have been successful. Also, the effects of these changes were merely cosmetic, leaving the pressing problems related to the lack of resources and professionalism unresolved.

The same goes for the Federal Council, whose effectiveness in dealing with the impact of internationalization and, above all, Europeanization, is criticized by numerous observers, stressing above all the work overload of the Federal Council, its resulting shift of power towards the administrative arena and its lack of a clear political vision (Germann 1996; Kriesi 1998a; Linder 1999; Klöti 2007). In addition to such overload-related criticism, structural limitations, e.g. the very short presidencies (limited to one year) of the

Federal Council and the two chambers of Parliament, can be questioned from an efficiency perspective. For instance, the presidents of Parliament and government have difficulties in establishing personal contacts at the international level, simply because their period in office is too short. In a personal communication to one of the authors, a former president of the National Council stated that at international meetings, such as the Conference of Presidents of European Parliaments,¹⁵ for the Swiss it is not even worth exchanging business cards with their colleagues. So far, various attempts to create a modern and more efficient form of government, i.e. by introducing a two-stage executive, by increasing the number of Federal Councillors or by extending the power and mandate of the presidency of the government, have all failed: most recently, in 2004, the Federal Assembly dismissed a profound reform project, aiming at a restructuring of both the executive and the administration.

Besides external pressures, the changing face of partisan politics (chapter 6) has led to a politicization of the governmental college: open conflict within the Federal Council, coupled with a creeping personalization of Swiss politics, challenges the collegial decision-making process. As the media are revealing on an almost daily basis, the climate within the college has become increasingly frosty. After the election of the polarizing leader of the Swiss People's Party (Christoph Blocher) to the Federal Council, the traditional homogenizing mechanisms are breaking down, leading to a situation in which both the horizontal coordination efforts among the seven departments and its over fifty offices and secretaries general (Klöti 2007: 157) as well as the vertical coordination of policies across levels of the federal state (Serdült and Schenkel 2006) are becoming more difficult.

Partly due to this lack of efficiency in the system of government, its *legitimacy* is decreasing. Among all political actors, the levels of trust in Parliament, government and its administration decreased most during the 1990s (Brunner and Sgier 1997: 106). Growing distrust in parliaments and governments is not unique to Switzerland, but affects all European democracies (Schmitter and Trechsel 2004). Newer data from the Eurobarometer survey conducted in 1999 show that only 50 per cent of the population tends to trust the Federal Council; the

¹⁵ Organized by the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, this conference takes place every second year.

same applies with respect to the federal administration and, in the case of the Federal Assembly, this figure even drops to 43 per cent. However, in 1999, the situation in Switzerland was still better than in the majority of the fifteen EU member states: with regard to trust in government, Switzerland comes fifth in this comparison.¹⁶ Trust in the Swiss Parliament is nevertheless lower than in most EU countries (in 1999): it only ranks in the tenth position, although it is still above the EU fifteen mean.¹⁷ But the process of erosion, though starting at a higher level than the EU average, is similar to the overall trend in Europe.

These shortcomings in both the efficiency and the legitimacy dimensions are not new but have been noted over decades by myriad experts. Furthermore, the political will to alter the situation has so far not been sufficiently strong. While at the time of writing profound structural changes are not likely, it is through the adaptation of informal rules that the Swiss system of government is evolving. The major risk of such a development is, however, the lack of a clear political vision that, moreover, is increasingly difficult to reach because of the growing partisan polarization in Swiss politics. In times of globalization, internationalization and Europeanization, this state of affairs may become one of the most pressing problems that the federal state is facing.

¹⁶ Only Luxembourg (64 per cent), the Netherlands (63 per cent), Portugal (55 per cent) and Finland (53 per cent) had higher levels of trust in their respective governments; the EU fifteen mean was 40 per cent (source: Eurobarometer 51).

¹⁷ Higher-ranking countries include the Netherlands (62 per cent), Luxembourg (61 per cent), Portugal (56 per cent), Finland (55 per cent), Denmark (54 per cent), Greece (51 per cent), Austria (47 per cent), Germany (45 per cent) and Spain (45 per cent); the EU fifteen mean was 41 per cent (source: Eurobarometer 51).

6 | *The party system*

6.1 Introduction

The presentation of the party system allows us to get a first idea of the political forces that determine Swiss politics. In a comparative perspective, three characteristics of the Swiss party system have long been salient – its fragmentation, its relative stability and its domination by parties of the moderate right. As Kerr (1987: 123) observed, the ‘dispersion of political power finds its fullest expression in a highly fragmented party system’. The fragmentation has been typical for the system as a whole as well as for each party taken separately. It has its origin in the large number of social and cultural cleavages, in the federal structure of the Swiss state and in the effects of the electoral system. Political stability is a result of the integrative force of the institutional framework and of the consensual political culture. Switzerland has long provided one of the main examples for Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) ‘freezing hypothesis’, according to which contemporary party systems still reflect the cleavage structure of the European societies at the end of World War I. The traditional weakness of the Swiss left and the domination by parties from the moderate right can at least in part be explained historically by the cultural dividedness, the early industrialization and the early democratization of the country (Bartolini 2000). However, as we will show in this chapter, in the course of the 1990s, the Swiss party system started to change and its volatility increased – with profound effects on the configuration of power in Swiss politics.

6.2 The fragmentation of the Swiss party system

The Swiss party system is one of the most fragmented in Western Europe. In the 1999 and 2003 elections, members of no less than fourteen parties were elected to the National Council. As is well known, however, the absolute number of parties does not have much

significance; we need to take into account the number of parties that count. According to Sartori (1976), a party ‘counts’ if it is taken into consideration for government coalitions or if it occupies a position allowing it to veto the government’s decisions. According to the first criterion, there are four parties that count at the federal level – the Radicals (the dominant branch of the Swiss liberals, called ‘Free Democrats’ (FDP) in the German-speaking part and ‘Radicals’ (PRD) in the French-speaking part of the country), the Christian Democrats (CVP/PDC), the Social Democrats (SP, called ‘Socialists’ (PS) in the French-speaking part) and the Swiss People’s Party (SVP, known as the ‘Union of the Democratic Centre’ (UDC) amongst French-speaking Swiss), i.e. the four parties that have formed the grand coalition government since 1959. Sartori added to these four the Alliance of Independents (LdU/AdI) – a small centre-left party that disappeared in the 1990s. This means that, according to Sartori, the Swiss party system – at the federal level – constituted a perfect example for his category of ‘moderate pluralism’. For two reasons, however, the situation in the Swiss party system is more complicated. First of all, based on the first criterion, we should also take into account the parties that count at the cantonal and local level, given that they participate in cantonal and local government coalitions. Thus, the Green Party plays a part in many cantonal and city governments. Even the Swiss Communist Party still participates in several city governments in the French-speaking part of the country and the Lega, a party of the radical right, participates in the cantonal and city government coalitions in Ticino – the Italian-speaking region. Moreover, as has been pointed out by Kerr (1987: 117), according to Sartori’s second criterion, i.e. according to the criterion of the veto position, *all* parties count in Switzerland. The institutions of direct democracy allow all parties, even the small ones, to intervene in a decisive fashion in Swiss politics. In fact, small parties have often made use of these instruments and the small parties of the radical right have used them with great success (Papadopoulos 1991). Given that these small parties are ideologically far apart, we should, based on Sartori’s second criterion, qualify the Swiss party system as an example of his ‘polarized pluralism’.

Comparative studies frequently refer to the ‘effective number of parties’, a measure introduced by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). This index has the advantage that it not only takes into account the number of parties, but also their size. At the federal level, the effective

number of parties reached an all time peak in the 1991 federal elections with 6.7. Since then it has declined to 5.0 in the 2003 elections. Compared to other countries, these are very high levels of fragmentation. In the post-war period (1945–96), Switzerland had the most fragmented party system in Europe (Lijphart 1999: 76). In the late 1990s, only Belgium, Italy and France had a higher effective number of parties, while the European mean was much lower and only slightly increasing after 1980 (Ladner 2001: 125).

6.3 The structuring of the party system

In general, the configuration of a party system depends on two types of factors: on the one hand, it is influenced by the structure of social and cultural cleavages; on the other hand it is determined by the political institutions. Let us first take a look at the Swiss *cleavage structure*. The relatively large number of structural conflicts that potentially serve as a basis for the formation of political parties provides a first explanatory factor for the important fragmentation of the Swiss party system. Switzerland is a country divided by the two classic cultural cleavages – religion and language – and by social class. Depending on the context, the religious cleavage takes two forms: in Protestant or religiously mixed regions, it divides Catholics from Protestants. In the predominantly Catholic regions of the former *Sonderbund*, it divides practising Catholics from the secularized parts of society. The religious conflict is articulated by two parties of uneven weight: a Catholic party – the Christian Democrats (CVP/PDC), which has been one of the key parties since the nineteenth century, and a minor Protestant party – the Evangelical Party (EVP/PEP). The Christian Democrats still have their strongholds in the predominantly Catholic cantons. Contrary to their sister parties in other European countries, they have not succeeded in attracting many Protestants and remain an almost exclusively Catholic party. Their close association with the Catholic milieu has made them very vulnerable to the secularization of Swiss society. As a matter of fact, the religious cleavage, which was still crucial for the electoral behaviour of Swiss voters in the 1970s (Lijphart 1979), lost much of its relevance by the 1990s (Trechsel 1994; Lachat 2004).

In contrast to Belgium, there are no major parties that explicitly articulate the linguistic division of the country. In Switzerland, religion has been the key divisive cultural issue, while language has always been

of secondary importance. The exceptions that confirm the generally low profile of linguistic differences in Switzerland concern the canton of Berne, where the party system is divided between the dominant German-speaking region and the minority French-speaking region of the Southern Jura, and the Lega – a radical right party which articulates the dissatisfaction of the Italian-speaking minority with federal policy makers (especially in the domain of immigration and European integration). The impact of the linguistic divisions on voting behaviour has always been more apparent than real. It has been a consequence of the fact that the Swiss parties have cantonal roots and that some parties have been exclusively (e.g. the EVP) or predominantly (the small Liberal Party LPS/PLS) rooted in one language region.

As in other European countries, the class cleavage has been the most important structuring force of the Swiss party system. It divides the parties of the left and those of the right. On the left, the Swiss party system is dominated by the Social Democrats. Traditionally, they had to compete with the small Communist Party (PdA/PdT). Since the late 1960s, they were also challenged by the small parties of the new left, most of which have since disappeared. As elsewhere, the Green Party (GPS/PES) has established itself as the most important competitor of the Socialists. The Swiss left has always been one of the weakest in Western Europe. It was disadvantaged from the start by the cultural cleavages, in particular by the strong confessional loyalties among the Catholic working class and the counter-mobilization by the organizations of the Catholic pillar (Altermatt 1991; Righart 1986). Moreover, the left was also disadvantaged by the fact that, at the time of the initial mobilization of the labour movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the field was already occupied by its competitors – not only by Catholic organizations, but also by the Free Democrats. The Social Democrats first mobilized when the Swiss working class had already established political identities and was no longer ‘available’ for the socialist message (Bartolini 2000).

The Swiss right is not only divided by the religious cleavage, but also by the opposition between town and countryside. Just as in Scandinavia, the conflict between the rural interests and the interests of the cities gave rise to a farmers’ party in the traditionally Protestant parts of the country (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Thus, the precursor of the Swiss People’s Party (founded in 1971) – the party of the farmers and of small businesses and tradesmen – articulated the interests of the countryside

against the Free Democrats, who had their stronghold in the cities. As a result of this division, three major parties have traditionally shared the majority of the votes cast by voters on the right.

The traditional class cleavage has also weakened considerably over the past decades. With the expansion of the new middle class, the traditional conflict between labour and capital has become less relevant for the structuration of the party system. However, if we take into account the structural divisions within the new middle class, most notably the division between managers, on the one hand, and social-cultural professionals, on the other hand, we find that the reconfigured class structure is still of key importance for the structuration of the party system (Lachat 2004). As a matter of fact, compared to countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany or Sweden, the divisions within the new middle class have particularly important implications for the political choices in Switzerland (Oesch 2004, 2006). Moreover, as we shall see, there is also a new conflict shaping up in Swiss politics between the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of globalization – a conflict that was crucial for the restructuring of the Swiss party system during the 1990s.

As far as *political institutions* are concerned, the structure of the party system has mainly been influenced by federalism and by the electoral system. For the elections of the National Council, a majoritarian system was applied until 1919, when the proportional system was introduced as a concession to the national strike that took place one year before. As a result of the introduction of the proportional system, the predecessor of the Swiss People’s Party made its entry into national politics (Gruner 1977: 153) and the configuration of power in the party system changed dramatically: the domination by the Radicals, who had always obtained a majority of the seats in the National Council, came to an end. However, the impact of the proportional system on the party system has been limited by a certain number of factors: first of all, the fact that the constituencies correspond to the cantons has served to limit the proportionality of the National Council. Since most of the cantons are quite small, i.e. since they have only a small number of seats, the electoral threshold is generally rather high. Moreover, except for the canton of Jura, the Council of States is elected according to the majoritarian system, with each constituency, i.e. each canton, returning two members. Such a two-member constituency system, which existed in many English wards of the House of Commons before the Reform Act of 1884, greatly discourages small parties (Cox 1997: 43).

Finally, Swiss federalism has profoundly marked the party system. Traditionally, the parties have positioned themselves first of all in the cantonal context. As a result, the party systems varied from one canton to the next, with the national parties hardly constituting more than federations of the cantonal parties trying to maintain a precarious unity at the federal level. According to Kerr (1987: 123), one could hardly speak of federal elections in terms of the national arena for party competition. Kerr considered it more adequate 'to speak of political contests being fought out in spatially segmented spheres of competition, defined by the relative weight of the various axes on which the partisan conflicts turn'. Schumann (1971: 125) was tempted to maintain that there was not one party system in Switzerland, but as many party systems as there were cantons. The first consequence of the fact that the parties were basically constituted at the cantonal level was the increase in the number of parties at the federal level, because, as we have already seen, some parties only exist in certain cantons and not in others. More important still is the fact that partisan federalism has traditionally contributed to the incoherence of each major party. As a consequence of federalism, the situation of one and the same party may differ considerably from one canton to another. Thus, the Christian Democrats still constitute the hegemonic party in several Catholic cantons, where they are the governing party *par excellence*. In the canton of Berne, by contrast, the Christian Democrats have always been an opposition party, a radical force that defended the rights of the Catholic and French-speaking minority in the Jura and became one of the major components of the separatist movement.

According to Klöti (1998: 49f.) and Kriesi (1998b: 6f.), we can distinguish between three types of cantonal party systems, each of which is characterized by a distinct party configuration. First of all, there is the system prevailing in Catholic cantons – a system dominated by the Christian Democrats. In these cantons, the traditional religious conflict between the Christian Democrats and their liberal opponents still predominates. The weakness of the left corresponds to the weakness of the class conflict in these cantons, where industrialization came late and never developed to the same extent as in the formerly Protestant cantons, and where the inter-classist strategy of the Christian Democrats preempted the Social Democrats. Moreover, the rural–urban conflict did not constitute a separate base for political mobilization in these cantons either, since the countryside remained mainly Catholic, while

the more secularized urban regions constituted the bastions, first of the liberals and, later on, of the left. Next, there is the system of religiously mixed German-speaking cantons, where the two traditional conflicts of religion and class have been largely pacified. In these cantons, a relatively strong left is confronted with the Radicals, on the one hand, and the Swiss People's Party on the other. Third, in the religiously mixed French-speaking cantons, an even stronger left faces the two currents of the nineteenth-century liberalism represented by the (more conservative) Liberal Party and the (more progressive) Radicals. In these cantons, the traditional class conflict has long been kept alive by the competition between these two liberal currents and by the corresponding competition between the two components of the left – the Socialists and the Communists.

6.4 The parties as organizations

Swiss parties are generally rather weak organizations. Compared to parties in other western democracies and to Swiss interest associations they are underfunded, understaffed and generally lacking in resources. In Switzerland, as in France, the introduction of universal suffrage preceded the creation of party organizations. In the absence of such organizations, networks of local elites functioned as instruments for the representation of the masses. This so-called 'militia system', made up of non-professional politicians, contributed to the preservation of organizational weakness all the way to the present day. Swiss politicians work on a voluntary or part-time basis. Although the *professionalization* of the party apparatuses progresses, it does not do so at the same pace as in other countries. Although the number of staff positions in the party system doubled between the 1970s and the mid 1990s to reach about 130 full-time positions, the level of professionalization still remains below average compared to other countries. Only the United Kingdom and the Netherlands have lower rates of increase, but in absolute terms these countries reach a generally higher level of professionalization (Ladner 1998, 2001: 134f.).

Compared to parties in other countries, Swiss parties also have only limited *financial resources*, both in absolute terms and in terms of growth rates over recent years. Partly responsible for this is the almost total lack of state funding. At the national level, the state only contributes some 4.5 million francs a year to support the parliamentary

groups. A parliamentary reform which would have improved the infrastructure of the parliamentarians failed to obtain a majority in a popular vote in 1992. At the cantonal level, there is hardly any direct support for the parties at all, but they benefit from indirect measures of support such as tax deductions, subsidies to cover printing and distribution costs, free poster space, etc. At the end of the 1990s, the total budget reported by the four governing parties at the federal level amounted to 9.8 million francs. In real terms, it had roughly doubled over the last three decades (Ladner 2001: 135). But compared to most of the other countries, these figures remain very small indeed. The figures are more significant when we also add in the budgets of the cantonal and local parties. Ladner (2004) estimates that the total of Swiss party budgets at all three levels amounts to 40–4 million francs in a non-election year and to about 65–75 million in an election year.

As observed above, Swiss parties have strong cantonal and local roots. Thus, Ladner (1991) found no less than 6,000 political groupings at the communal level. He found parties in more than two-thirds of the 3,000 Swiss communes, most of which are very small indeed. At the local level, parties are by far the most important political actors. Moreover, the party system proved to be quite dynamic during the 1970s and 1980s, when it went through a new phase of expansion: the number of local sections increased – even among the traditional parties. However, in a follow-up study covering the development of the party system up to the mid 1990s, Ladner could no longer confirm this expansionary trend. Instead, he now found a trend towards an erosion of the major parties, especially in the small communes. The parties tended to be replaced by local groups which do not necessarily have the character of a party (Ladner 1996).

There are other signs of a weakening of the parties: as in many other countries, party identification has been in decline over the last three decades (Nabholz 1998; Lachat 2004). Party membership is declining, too. Since the Swiss parties do not have reliable membership data, the real size of membership is difficult to estimate. Ladner (1998) has come up with an estimated 6.7 per cent of the total population, while the post-electoral survey for the 2003 federal elections reports an active membership of 5.7 per cent. These figures are still higher than the average in Western Europe (Mair and van Biezen 2001: 9). The parties also have recruitment problems. They have difficulties in filling the many positions in local assemblies and committees which are part of the

Swiss militia system. As for the parties' prestige among the general public, it is very low. Except for the press, the Swiss have less confidence in the parties than in any other political actor or institution: only 27 per cent trusted the parties in 1996, compared to 69 per cent who trusted the police, 66 per cent who trusted the courts and still 52 per cent who trusted the government (Brunner and Sgier 1997: 107). Taken together, these figures suggest that the Swiss party system as a whole has been experiencing a certain decline.

However, not all parties are suffering from such a decline. This seems to be above all a problem of the two major parties of the moderate right – the Radicals and the Christian Democrats – while the Social Democrats and the Swiss People's Party have been more fortunate over the last decades. The Swiss People's Party in particular has been making a lot of progress in recent years. Since Christoph Blocher took over the Zurich branch of the party in the late 1970s, this branch has become increasingly prominent in its own party and in the party system as a whole. Blocher gave his party a clear profile by positioning it to the right of its main competitors. Under his undisputed, charismatic leadership, the party made big strides towards the professionalization of its organization and its campaigns (Hartmann and Horvath 1995). In the course of the 1990s, the Swiss People's Party became the best-led and best-funded party in Switzerland, staffed by highly motivated people who worked hard and sponsored by some very rich businessmen. While other parties experienced a decline in their membership, by the year 2000 membership in the Swiss People's Party had increased by roughly 50 per cent. Most conspicuously, the Swiss People's Party adopted the principles of modern 'media-centred' campaigning (Swanson and Mancini 1996), characterized by:

- an increasing distance between parties and voters
- permanent campaigning
- a personalization of politics
- an increasing role for political consultants and marketing specialists
- the development of independent communication structures
- a spectator's role for the citizens

More specifically, the party adopted an aggressive style, relying on negative campaigning and systematic denigration of its direct competitors and of the 'political class' as a whole. In a populist manner, it appealed to the common sense of the ordinary voter. Its enemies included the

media, board members and managers of big companies, ‘social parasites’, Socialists and the left in general. Its strategy proved to be highly successful and crucial for the profound transformation of the Swiss party system that has taken place since the beginning of the 1990s (Kriesi *et al.* 2005).

6.5 The transformation of the party system

The Swiss party system had already started to change in the late 1960s. Three successive waves of opposition diminished the electoral success of the four major parties (see table A1 in the Appendix). The first wave was led by the Alliance of Independents (LdU), which mobilized above all voters without partisan attachments from among the new middle class. The next wave of opposition came from small parties on the radical right, which mobilized against the tremendous influx of foreigners. In their analysis of the 1971 federal elections, Inglehart and Sidjanski (1975: 110) had already found a first indication of what they called at the time a ‘progressive-traditionalist’ cleavage pitting the left and the Christian Democrats against the new radical-populist right. In the late 1970s, these parties temporarily went into decline, while a third wave of opposition led by the small parties of the new left (the Progressive organizations (POCH), Trotskyites and the Greens) took off. In the 1987 elections, these three waves cumulated for the first time and the joint success of these outsiders reached a peak in 1991. As we have seen, the result was a record fragmentation of the party system. This was, however, only the prelude to a more profound transformation of the party system under the onslaught of the mobilization by the Swiss People’s Party. This party won the next three elections and increased its share of the votes for the National Council from roughly 11 per cent in the 1980s to 28.9 per cent in 2007. As is illustrated by figure 6.1, its ascent came at the expense of the moderate right and the radical right. Its clear-cut positioning on the right closed the door to the small parties of the radical right, which all but disappeared in the process. The two major parties of the moderate right – the Radicals and the Christian Democrats – were also severely beaten. The left maintained itself, but did not progress.

The victorious advance of the Swiss People’s Party began with its successful mobilization against Swiss accession to the UN in 1986 and, above all, with the campaign against Swiss accession to the European

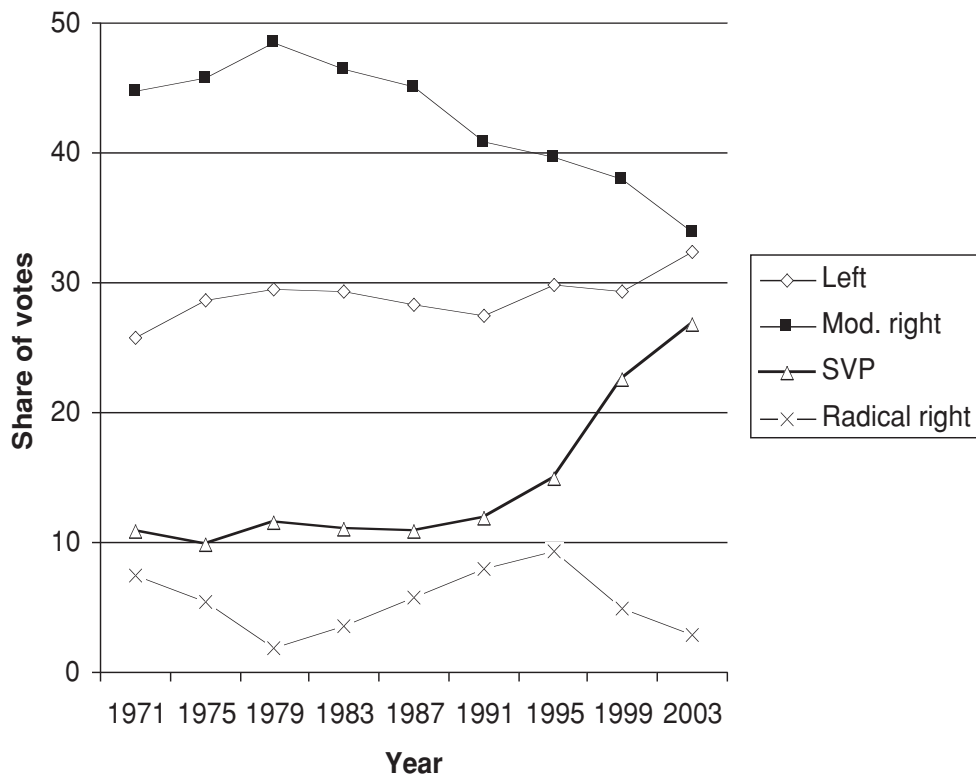


Figure 6.1 Development of party strength, 1971–2003: share of votes in National Council elections

Economic Area (EEA) in 1992. At the end of the longest and most intense direct democracy campaign ever held in Switzerland, the party won a very narrow victory against the otherwise united political elite and succeeded in putting the brakes on Swiss integration into the EU. The mobilization for the defence of a neutral and independent Switzerland first started to pay off in electoral terms in the formerly Protestant cantons in the German-speaking part of the country, most notably in the canton of Zurich. Since the 1920s, the Swiss People's Party had dominated the party system in the heavily rural and Protestant canton of Berne. In the much more urbanized canton of Zurich, it had its strongholds in the countryside, but was weak in the city and in the metropolitan area. In the course of the 1990s, the Zurich branch made great progress in the urban areas and ended up in an even stronger position than the Berne branch (see figure 6.2). After having successfully advanced on its former main turf, the party also expanded in the two types of cantonal party systems, where it had traditionally been marginal or absent. As is illustrated by figure 6.2, in 1995 the party started its ascent in the Catholic part of the country (Lucerne and Schwyz are

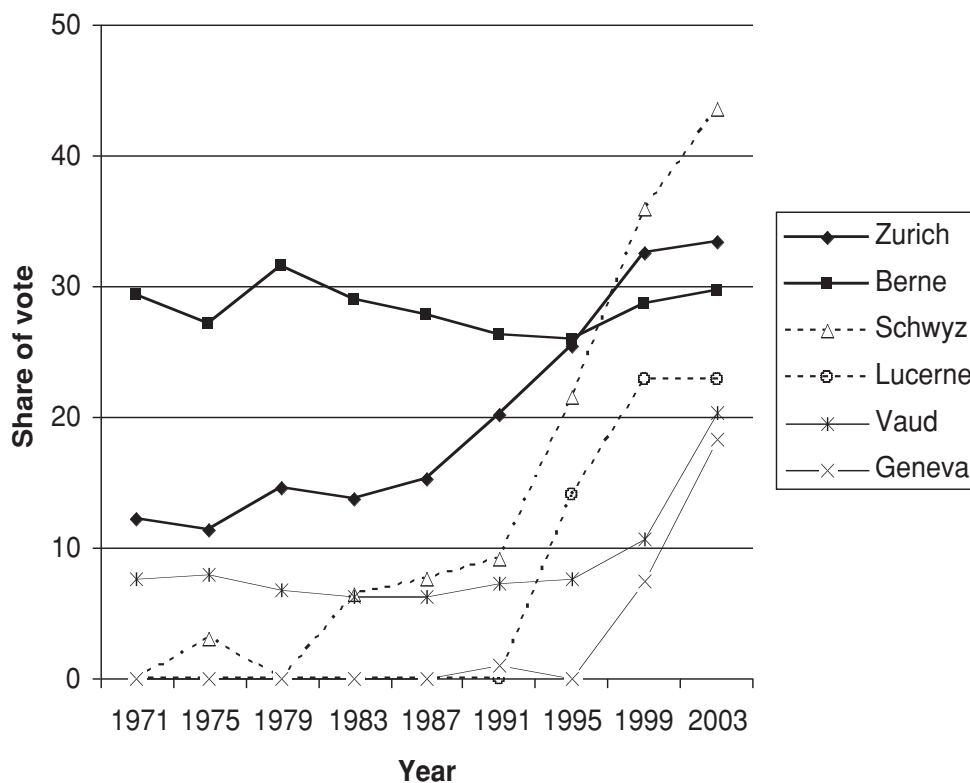


Figure 6.2 Development of party strength, 1971–2003, in selected cantons: share of votes in National Council elections

presented as typical examples), and in 1999 it started to take off in the French-speaking cantons (Vaud and Geneva serve as the examples). Beginning as a Swiss-German, rural and Protestant party, the Swiss People's Party has become a national party with a general conservative appeal.

The party mobilizes the globalization 'losers', i.e. the (unskilled) working class and the old middle class. In Switzerland, the latter has traditionally been sheltered from market pressures through public regulation. The farmers provide, of course, the typical example, but the whole sector of small businesses and tradesmen producing for the internal market (*Gewerbe*) has equally been protected in the past. With the extension of international liberalization, this sector has experienced an erosion of its politically based property rights and the related streams of income (Schwartz 2001: 44). The party's appeal, however, is not directly economic, but mainly based on its opposition to European integration and its tough stance on immigration, which have to be understood as a cultural defence of Swiss traditions. A detailed analysis of the 1999 elections (Kriesi and Sciarini 2004) has shown that, to the benefit of the SVP, the issues of EU integration and asylum had

the most discriminating effects on the voting choices. In particular, the SVP's positioning on the two most important issues of the day allowed the party to reinforce its voters' initial voting intention, to win over converts from all the other three major parties and to activate undecided voters in its favour. Similarly, the left also gained from reinforcement, crystallization and conversion at the expense of the Radicals and the Christian Democrats, albeit to a lesser extent than the Conservatives. By contrast, the two intermediary party families (the Radicals and the Christian Democrats) clearly fared less well in this respect, since they could neither benefit from issue-related conversion, nor from crystallization, and hardly from reinforcement. Analyses of the 2003 election survey confirm the crucial importance of the EU-integration issue for the rise of the SVP (Kriesi *et al.* 2005). In addition, these analyses also document the key importance of the party's charismatic leader – Christoph Blocher – who became entirely identified with the party's resistance against Switzerland's participation in the European integration process.

As a result of the SVP's successful advance, the Swiss party system is now structured into three camps which can be placed in a two-dimensional space. The first dimension is the classic opposition between left and right, whereby the parties of the left which defend the welfare state and promote environmental protection oppose the parties of the right which promote economic liberalism and budgetary rigour. The second dimension, by contrast, is constituted by the cultural opposition between the promoters of an open, culturally liberal Switzerland and the defenders of Swiss traditions. As a result of the successful mobilization of the SVP, the right (which enjoys a majority in Switzerland) is now clearly divided into two camps: the moderate right, composed of the Radicals/Liberals and the Christian Democrats, who tend to be both economically and culturally liberal, and the nationalist-conservative right (SVP), which is culturally conservative and economically ambiguous – in favour of budgetary rigour but defending the privileges of its traditional middle-class clientele. These two dimensions and the three camps can be detected not only by an analysis of the parties' positioning in the electoral campaigns of the 1990s (Kriesi *et al.* 2006), but also by an analysis of the voting behaviour of the members of the National Council (Kriesi 2001) and by an analysis of the referendum votes during the two decades between 1982 and 2002 (Hermann and Leuthold 2003).

Paradoxically, it was the advance of the conservatives which has contributed to the transformation and, we should add, the modernization of the Swiss party system. The conservatives have been the main modernizers not only with respect to organizational strategies, but also with respect to the nationalization of Swiss politics. By their stepwise conquest of the three types of cantons, they have contributed to the nationalization of the Swiss party system. In addition, they have also contributed to an increase in partisan competition and to a less consensual style. Under their influence, the Swiss party system has become more polarized and has lost some of its consensual character. Finally, the conservatives have contributed to a general right-ward shift, because their competitors from the moderate right felt compelled to adjust their positions so as to limit their losses.

However, in order to get a complete picture of the transformation of the Swiss party system, we should take into account not only the elections to the National Council but also those for the second chamber – the Council of States. Given that the Swiss Parliament is characterized by a symmetrical bicameralism (see chapter 5), the party composition of the second chamber is just as important as that of the National Council. Moreover, we should also take into account the results of the cantonal parliamentary and governmental elections. We cannot go into too much detail here, but would like to point out that the transformation is less pronounced in the elections held with a majoritarian system, i.e. in cantonal governmental elections and in the elections for the Council of States. This is illustrated by figure 6.3, which compares the strength of the moderate right in the Council of States (for more details, see table A2 in the Appendix) with its electoral success in the elections for the National Council. As becomes immediately apparent from this comparison, the decline of the two parties of the moderate right in the elections for the National Council since the late 1970s contrasts sharply with their continued domination of the Council of States. This contrast points to an imbalance in the Swiss party system – an increasing tension between the territorial representation (in the Council of States) and the representation of the population (in the National Council). Given the highly unequal territorial distribution of the population and the properties of the majoritarian electoral system, the parties of the moderate right are able to maintain their domination, as long as they build electoral alliances for elections to the Council of States.

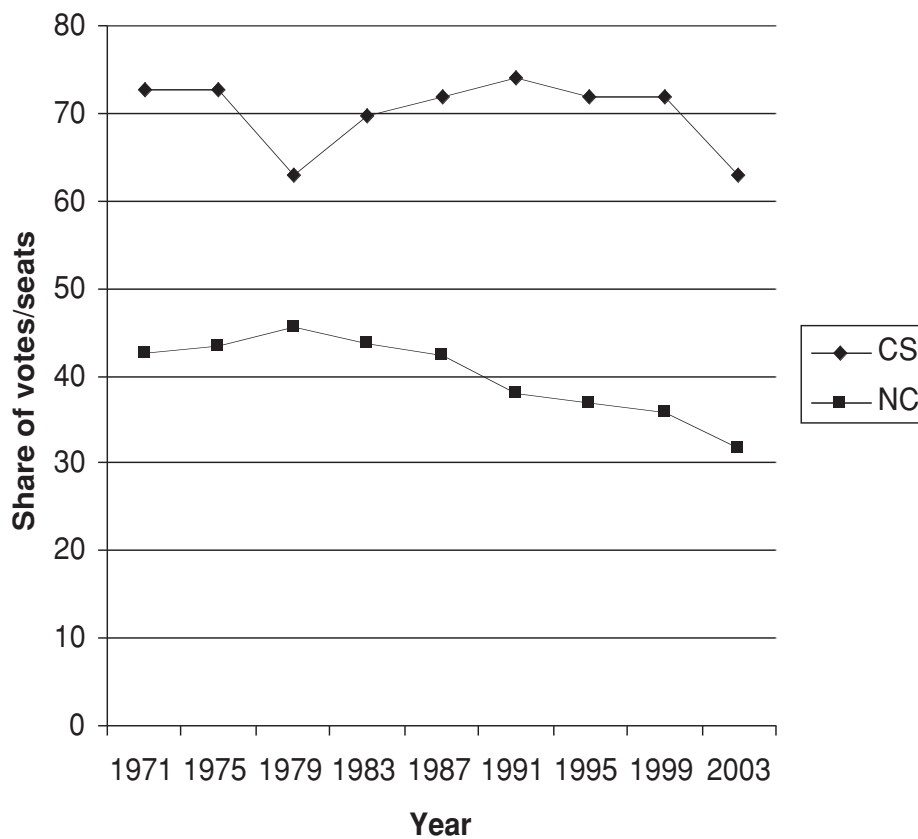


Figure 6.3 Strength of moderate right in National Council and Council of States: share of votes (NC) and share of seats (CS)

6.6 Conclusion

After the federal elections in 2003, Christoph Blocher, the charismatic leader of the Swiss People's Party, was elected to become a member of the Federal Council. With his election, the 'magic formula' came to an end after having lasted for more than forty years: Blocher became the second member of government from the SVP, at the expense of the Christian Democrats. Blocher's election to the Federal Council constitutes a strong symbol for the transformation of the Swiss party system. As the continuing and increasing tension between the composition of the two chambers of Parliament indicates, this transformation is unlikely to be complete. The realignment within the right-wing majority is likely to continue with profound consequences for Swiss politics.