Elections 1995: Portraits of the parties. Part I, Liberals: the founders of the federal state

Elections 1995: Portraits of the parties (I)

Liberals: the founders of the federal state

In the run-up to the 1995 federal elections, we are presenting a series of articles on the political parties represented in the federal parliament. We start with a brief portrait of the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP).

We have chosen the FDP to introduce our series on Switzerland's political parties for two reasons. It obtained the highest number of votes last time, and it is also the direct successor to the group of parties which founded the federal state in the 19th century.

Giuseppe Rusconi

This year the party is celebrating its hundredth birthday in its present form. It was in 1894 that the old Radical Democratic movement came together with a majority of the then Liberals to form a new party.

The strongest group

At the last elections in 1991, the FDP was the only party to obtain over 20% of votes (see chart on page 5). But the agreement reached in 1959 between the four biggest parties – known as the magic formula – means that it has only two of the seven seats on the Federal Council. In parliament, however, it has 62 of the 246 seats (44 in the National Council and 18 in the Council of States) and is therefore the strongest group. In the 1991 elections, its candidates came top in the cantons of Soleure, Vaud, Basle Rural, Ticino and Vaud. They took second place in Lucerne, Schwyz, Zug, Basle City, Schaffhausen, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, St. Gall, Thurgau, Valais and Jura. Their position is also strong in the city of Zurich. In the 1991 municipal and cantonal elections, the FDP put in a varied performance, but the trend was not downward.

Liberalism has strong roots throughout Switzerland. Ideologically speaking it is most strongly anchored in the cities, centres of trade where the middle classes used to be concentrated. But it now has substantial support in rural areas too. In French-speaking Switzerland it competes with today's Liberal Party, its "breakaway sister".

The historical adversaries of the Liberals were the Christian Democrats, known as "Ultramontane" because they were said to receive their orders from Rome, i.e. from beyond the Alps. Today these old disputes have lost much of their significance or have disappeared altogether, and the two parties cooperate successfully in most fields. The ideological gulf is much greater between the Liberals and the Social Democrats. This is particularly true in areas like economics, social policy, defence, public order, environment and transport. The FDP nevertheless attaches great importance to inter-party cooperation within the Federal Council and tries to find pragmatic solutions to the most tricky problems. It was in this spirit that its attitude to the extremely controversial succession to Social Democrat Federal Councillor René Felber was described as "friendly".

Economic freedom

The Swiss People's Party (SVP) is the FDP's most dangerous rival on the right, particularly in German-speaking Switzerland with the famous orator from Zurich, Christoph Blocher. The threat looms particularly large on domestic issues such as public order, criminality and asylum policy. There are two other parties which also try to make things difficult for the FDP on these matters with an increasingly harsh turn of language. These are the Freedom Party (formerly the Auto Party) and the Swiss Democrats (formerly National Action).

The FDP's main objective is to maintain and promote the maximum freedom compatible with the freedom of others. It is basically a party of the centre-right – but without taking rigid stances on most issues. This aspect is seen clearly in the wide differences of opinion between French and German speakers on drug policy. The party is in fact often split. A "right" wing in the Council of States which takes a strong line on economic and defence issues cohabits with a more future-oriented and socially committed "left" wing. But these treat each other with complete mutual respect.

The FDP is certainly the party which stands closest to the private economic sector. It should not be seen as speaking for Swiss industry in all cases, but there does exist an ideological identity based

National Councillor Franz Steinegger, president of the Liberal Democratic Party, together with the FDP's federal councillors, Kaspar Villiger (left) and Jean-Pascal Delamuraz (right). (Photo: ruti)

on the old liberal principle that economic freedom is absolutely essential to political freedom. ∎

Liberal Democratic Party (FDP)
Founded: 1894; Members: about 150,000. Seats: National Council 44, Council of States 18. Chairman: National Councillor Franz Steinegger, (UR).
Address: FDP Switzerland, P.O. Box 6136 CH-3001 Berne, Tel. +41 31 311 34 38