

The federal elections of October 24th 1999 : the orientation of federal politics at stake

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The orientation of federal politics

Swiss politics: grey, boring, devoid of surprise. So it is a safe bet that the next federal elections of October 1999 will not bring any great change to the political landscape of this country. Really'

The four governmental parties (Social Democrat, Liberal Democrat, Christian Democrat, Swiss People's Party) will continue to monopolise more than 4/5 of the seats in Parliament, women will gain a few additional seats, the average age of

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parliamentarians will fall slightly, and Switzerland will start the new millennium as it finished the old one. The Swiss political system is not one of alternation but one of concordance – which gives it its reputation for monotony.

Nevertheless, in national terms the stakes of the legislative elections are as great as anywhere else abroad. The orientation of federal politics depends upon them, and this for well beyond the four years of the new legislature. So it is better to suppress the yawns that federal politics inspire in us at first and enter into the heart of the subject. For we are, we Swiss, direct actors in politics which we can influence throughout the whole legislature.

Progress for women?

It is true that, if on the evening of October 24th 1999, the Government camp sees its absolute majority in Parliament confirmed as is always the case, the distribution of strength between these 4 parties (and the political currents within each of them) will without doubt be at the centre of interest.

Will the Socialists succeed in maintaining their 1995 result, which enabled them, by obtaining 13 additional seats, to become the strongest party, and will the ultra-conservative wing of the Swiss People's Party gain more weight than 3 years ago? Outside the Government camp, will the Greens succeed in regaining the ground lost? And will there still be room for a Freedom Party – formally

the Automobilists' party – the Alliance of Independents or the Labour Party – and for which?

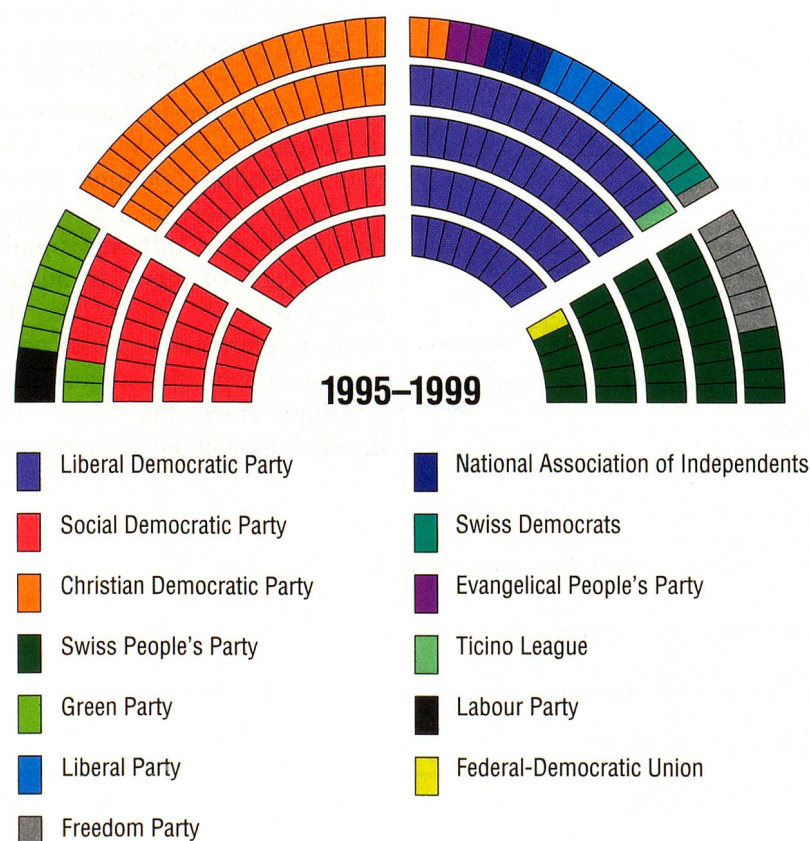
What will be the place of women in the new Parliament? Their progress has been continuous since they became eligible – in 1971 – but 4 years ago they obtained only 25.5% of seats in the National Council. The feminist organisations are becoming impatient and are tempted by the "solution of a quota" favoured by a popular initiative at present going through Parliament. In addition, women in the various parties are demanding this: they want quotas for women on the lists and privileged treatment throughout the whole campaign. The place of women in politics and in Swiss society will be both one of the stakes and one of the subjects of the 1999 federal elections.

But the question of the role of women will remain an underlying one. The least advanced in terms of emancipation, on the right, will have to make some concessions to their feminine component. Because those who want to win the elections need women's votes too. But it is against the big classical subjects that parties and candidates will have to measure up. European policy, social questions, economic policy, balancing the federal budget, internal security, transport policy, the image and recent past of Switzerland.

Increasing interlinkage

Choices of great importance await the Swiss in all these fields. In foreign policy, it will be the start of a possible procedure for adhesion to the European Union and of a new attempt to join the UN. In the social field solutions have to be found to problems caused by the aging of the population (reconsidering retirement ages, new financial resources and redimensioning social security).

Seat distribution in the National Council



es at stake

In doing this it will be necessary to take account of the economic field, in which it will be possible to measure the effects of the efforts to revitalise, adapt structures and liberalise. The effort to optimise the economic framework will have to continue, but it will require changes and corrections which will have their effect on social, regional, ecological, fiscal and employment policies. In fact all these fields are closely interlinked, and simple solutions no longer exist.

One of the most interesting and least expected lessons of the last federal elections in 1995 was the progress of the governmental parties, which increased their score by 4.3% in relation to 1991, after being in constant retreat since 1979. There is, it is true, nothing spectacular about that at first sight, but in looking more closely it may be seen that in the Government camp, the centre lost ground to the advantage of the "extremes", on the left as on the right. Socialists and the Blocher SVP won those elections because they put themselves across better than the others. If these apparently harmless phenomena should become stronger it could disrupt the functioning of our political system based on concordance and call for a reform of our political institutions. ■

Registration rate: expectation exceeded

Swiss Abroad have been able to vote at the federal level since 1975, and since 1992 by post. During the interval since 1992 the number of those who have put their names down on the voting register of a Swiss municipality has risen from about 14,000 to over 66,000. For comparison: 9 cantons have fewer citizens entitled to vote, as does Lausanne, the fifth biggest Swiss city. About 15% of all Swiss Abroad of voting age have registered. This exceeds the expectations of the Federal Council, which before the introduction of voting by post was expecting a registration rate of 10%.

RL

Voting and being elected

Swiss Abroad can not only take part in Federal elections, but they may also themselves be elected. The simplest is when they are put on a list by a party but they may also hand in their own list. This should not include more names than the corresponding canton has seats in the National Council. Every list must be signed by a specific number of voters residing in the same canton (100 to 400, according to the number of seats of the canton). In addition, every canton decides on a Monday between August 1 and September 30 as the last date for voting registration, the date until which valid voting proposals must be handed in.

At present a quota regulation is being discussed by which a minimum number of places will be guaranteed on every list for each gender. As we went to press, it was not yet clear whether these decisions would be made before the 1999 elections.

RL

The political rights of the Swiss Abroad

Few differences in electoral behaviour

Swiss Abroad may also vote. A good 66,000 of them have registered.

Here a second seat for the Greens, there a few more votes for the CVP, and there a seat for "Renaissance Schweiz-Europa". This is what would have happened in 1995 in Cantons Lucerne, Geneva and Vaud if only the voting slips from abroad had been counted. But on the whole divergence from the overall result was small. Even though this was merely a spot check from 3 out of 26 cantons, the conclusion can be drawn that the Swiss Abroad do not vote much differently from "the rest of us".

Three years ago those entitled to vote abroad could take part in federal elections by post for the first time. More precisely stated, in the elections to the National Council, for the right to vote by post is valid only at the federal level. In the Cantons of Basle Rural, Berne, Geneva, Jura, Soleure, and Ticino (but only if the voter has his municipality of origin in Ticino) they can also take part in Council of States elections since in those cantons the regulations also allow political participation at the cantonal level.

Today the so-called Fifth Switzerland can lay a respectable potential in votes in the balance (see box), particularly when Swiss Abroad are directly affected by a voting text. But participation in

votes in Switzerland is more work for them than for Swiss at home. First they must register for the exercise of their political rights and renew that registration every four years. In addition, it is more difficult for them to obtain information, particularly in more distant countries or in regions where the postal system does not function well. And lastly, the short time allowed for returning voting papers contains the danger that the political rights cannot be made use of.

These problems appear more strongly with elections. On the one hand the legal minimum dates for the dispatch of documents are even shorter. On the other hand they involve forming a view not only of the countless candidates, but also of the party landscape which appears differently from canton to canton.

This led to the fact that the turnout of the Swiss Abroad in the 1995 elections was about the same as for Switzerland as a whole, whereas in referendums it is as a rule slightly higher than the average. But like the information about electoral conduct, these figures should be taken with caution, since they are based on spot checks in individual municipalities or in cantons with a central electoral register for Swiss Abroad. The majority of the voting slips from abroad disappear in the general pot of all votes cast.

René Lenzin