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Young politicians under the Federal Palace dome

The proportion of National Councillors below the age of 40 stood at 18% at the 2011 elections. The number of young politicians has not been as high for almost a century. Who are these young high-flyers, and why are they being elected?

By Seraina Gross

They have not yet turned 30 but already they are well up the political career ladder. Among the young stars in the Swiss Parliament at the beginning of June, four National Councillors had yet to celebrate their 30th birthday. Young Socialist Cédric Wermuth was elected to the large chamber in Aargau at the age of just 25 at the federal elections in October 2011, as was Mathias Reynard, also aged 25, a teacher and Social Democrat from the village of Savièse in Valais. The others are two Bernese politicians, Aline Trede (29) of the Greens and Nadine Masshardt (28) of the Social Democrats. Both moved up to the Na-

doubled in comparison to previous elections. It is in fact higher today than the proportion of the population that age group comprises," Seitz remarks. The average age of National Councillors elected in 2011 stood at 50 – two years lower than in 2003. In 1999, two under-30s were elected to Parliament, while there were five in 2003, six in 2007 and four in 2011.

The star from St. Gallen

The election of Toni Brunner in 1995 caused a sensation. The young farmer and current Party President of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) became the youngest National Coun-

Brunner's cow "Rösli" and his dog "Bäärli" became newsworthy. Today, almost 18 years and four National Council elections later, Toni Brunner – who is still under 40 – has long been a firm fixture in Berne. He failed to make the career step to the Council of States but he did succeed Ueli Maurer at the head of the SVP in 2008 following the latter's election to the Federal Council.

From "accident" to strategy

The election of Toni Brunner marked the start of a trend. A few more young politicians have since made the step up to Berne every four



Aline Trede, Greens



Céline Amadruz, SVP



Christian Wasserfallen, FDP

tional Council at the beginning of March to replace party colleagues Franziska Teuscher and Ursula Wyss, who had been elected to Berne's city government.

While Switzerland's population is ageing all the time, its politicians are getting younger and younger. The proportion of those under the age of 40 stood at 18 per cent at the 2011 National Council elections. This is the highest figure for almost a hundred years, as an overview produced by the Federal Statistical Office reveals. You would have to go back to 1919 to find a comparably high proportion of National Councillors aged under 40, at 21.2%. Werner Seitz, a political scientist at the Federal Statistical Office, points out that there has primarily been an increase in the number of 30 to 39 year olds. "The number of politicians elected in this age bracket has

cillor of all time when he was elected at the age of just 21. The former Party President, Hans Uhlmann, persuaded the young politician to stand for election. The cantonal SVP in St. Gallen, which had only recently been founded, was participating in National Council elections for the first time. It was lacking numbers.

Nobody expected Toni Brunner to be elected to the National Council – he was extremely young, he did not come from a prominent or wealthy family, and he lacked the political experience that comes with the usual hard slog through school administration, communal council and cantonal parliament. He himself calls it an "accident" – no wonder this whizz kid was swamped by the media. The "Blick" newspaper extolled his big brown eyes and complexion "as healthy as the air in Hundsrücken above Ebnet-Kappel". Even

years. In 1999, Brunner was joined by someone of his own age for the first time with the arrival of Bernese Social Democrat Ursula Wyss. However, the election of this Young Socialist was no "accident" but rather the result of a strategic decision. The Social Democratic Party (SP) in Berne deliberately focussed on the appeal of young faces and put the then 26-year-old Wyss right at the top of its National Council list. The young Bernese politician later became faction president, the most important position within the party after the Party President. However, she too failed to secure election to the Council of States in March 2011. The Social Democrat lost out to Adrian Amstutz, the SVP candidate from the Bernese Oberland.

The strategy of introducing young faces to attract votes during election campaigns set a precedent. The SP, then the SVP and finally

also the centre parties recognised the strength of the “young (and female)” argument. At the 2007 elections, the SVP in Zurich put Natalie Rickli, who was just 30, in second place on its National Council list, right behind the then Party President Ueli Maurer. The young politician, who had only recently been elected to Zurich’s cantonal parliament, easily won her seat in Berne and was re-elected in 2011 with 145,776 votes – even ahead of Christoph Blocher, who had been deselected from the Federal Council and was standing again for the National Council.

Being young is nevertheless no guarantee of electoral success. Anita Borer, the young SVP candidate from Zurich, suffered the bitter taste of defeat at the same election. She failed to secure a seat in Berne despite being placed high on the list right behind Christoph Blocher.

Young politicians are media-savvy

Left-wing, right-wing or green, young politicians are not all of the same opinion. But one



Marco Romano, CVP

thing the young representatives of all parties have in common is that they are extremely good at dealing with the media. “Young people have grown up in a highly media-oriented world and know how to project themselves,” explains Zurich-based political scientist Michael Hermann. “And that is useful if you want to become a National Councillor.”

It is very evident that young politicians have less fear of the spotlight than older ones. Nothing is taboo for them, even their private lives, especially if a political message can be worked in. Ursula Wyss and Pascale Bruderer, her party peer from Aargau, posed back to back when pregnant in 2011 for the popular magazine “Schweizer Illustrierte”. The feature looked at whether pregnancy could be combined with a Council of States election campaign. Both young women used the cov-

erage to discuss children, careers, a lack of childcare places and the abiding political issue of work-life balance from personal experience. The Zurich Green politician Bastien Girod scored points with the public and the media in December 2007 when he cycled the 130 kilometres from Zurich to Berne for the first session.

A provocateur

Cédric Wermuth, the President of the Young Socialists, pushes things to the limit and sometimes beyond. In 2008, he lit up a joint on stage at the SP’s party conference to promote the legalisation of cannabis. He is also responsible for the tasteless poster produced during the referendum campaign on the initiative for a ban on the export of munitions. It depicted Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard with blood on her hands. But the approach adopted by this provocative figure from Aargau is paying dividends. He now represents the SP in the National Council. Orig-



Mathias Reynard, SP

inality, too, can help achieve objectives. Aline Trede, a Green politician from Berne, illustrates this point. In 2011, she posed on her election campaign poster wearing a green shirt with an anti-nuclear sticker and a red-and-white polka dot bandana, showing off her biceps and smiling. The poster won awards, and the young Bernese candidate secured the first replacement position.

Young talent promoted everywhere

The parties have grasped that youth is as attractive in politics as in other walks of life. They appreciate the appeal of their young members and are now focussing intensively on the development of young politicians. The Liberals have established a mentoring programme for young politicians where established campaigners take up-and-coming

youngsters under their wing. The SP has also set up a programme to promote young talent. The party secretariat of the Christian Democrat People’s Party (CVP) specifically aims to ensure that young politicians are given an opportunity at events when more senior representatives are tied up. Talented young politicians are also given the chance to assume responsibility whenever possible by the SVP. “This is not a marketing measure,” explains SVP spokesperson Kevin Grangier. “The involvement of young people constitutes political groundwork.”

The parties are not just doing all this for the joy of it, they are also under pressure. Young people today are no longer prepared to wait in line for years on end. They are self-assured, ambitious and believe in themselves. This is also evident in the youth parties. These are no longer an appendage of the parent party but instead independent parties with their own agenda.



Natalie Rickli, SVP

Although the parties, with very few exceptions, are focussing on youth, it is mainly in the parties at either end of the spectrum that politicians under 30 are being elected to the National Council. “Growing parties, such as the SVP, have shorter waiting lists,” remarks Zurich-based political scientist Michael Hermann. “This makes it easier for young politicians to be elected.” Examples include Jasmin Hutter, the SVP politician from St. Gallen, who was elected to the National Council in 2003, and her party colleague Lukas Reimann. Also from St. Gallen, he secured election in 2007 at the age of just 25.

The young stars in the “small chamber”

Of the centre parties, only the Liberals (FDP) initially managed to secure the election of a young star – Christa Markwalder

was 28 years old when she was sworn into the National Council in December 2003. She was joined in the National Council four years later by a second up-and-coming young Liberal – Christian Wasserfallen. Wasserfallen benefited from having a prominent name as the son of the now deceased head of the Bernese police department. Since the 2011



Nadine Masshardt, SP

elections, a Liberal has become the youngest member of the much-vaunted “chambre de réflexion” – Raphaël Comte from Neuchâtel was elected to the Council of States shortly after his 30th birthday. He and Pascale Bruderer, the Social Democrat from Aargau, are responsible for ensuring that the smaller chamber no longer lives up to its traditional elderly image. The Social Democrat Alain

Berset also helped to improve its image. He became the youngest President of the Council of States of all time before being elected to the Federal Council in December 2011 at the age of 39.

Reduced in size, the CVP did not manage to send a National Councillor aged under 30 to Berne until the 2011 elections. Marco Romano,



Raphaël Comte, FDP

a young politician from Ticino, was selected for the National Council in Ticino by the drawing of lots after he and his internal party opponent won exactly the same number of votes in the election. The young star of the CVP now sits in Berne next to the senior parliamentarian Jacques Neiryck from Vaud. The former professor at the Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne will celebrate his 83rd birthday in

August. “He could be my grandfather,” says Marco Romano. “But it makes no difference – on the contrary, we share lots of laughs.”

Around 50 on average

The Green Liberals (GLP) stand out on account of their young faces. This recently established political party has set itself the ob-



Tiana Angelina Moser, GLP

jective of achieving reconciliation between ecology and the economy. “The phenomenon that new parties lead to a lowering of the age of politicians is nothing new,” remarks political scientist Werner Seitz. “This has occurred repeatedly in the past irrespective of whether new parties were right-wing or left-wing.” In 2007, Tiana Angelina Moser of the GLP in Zurich entered the National Coun-

CHILDREN, TOO, GET INVOLVED IN POLITICS

Children and young people are interested in politics. The current SVP Party President Toni Brunner apparently began reading newspapers regularly at the age of 12, while the Green Party's Bernese National Councillor Aline Trede made her grandmother turn off the tap when brushing her teeth to save water. However, involvement is not restricted to such acts. Children and young people can also take part in the political process. In Switzerland, this happens during the Youth Session in Berne and at around 50 local and regional children's and young people's parliaments.

In 1991, a Youth Session was held at the Federal Palace for the first time to mark the 700th anniversary of the confederation. For once, young people sat in the seats usually occupied by greying men and a few women in suits. On that occasion, the youngsters called for better environmental protection, a Switzerland that was open to the world and showed solidarity, and Switzerland's rapid accession to the European Union. The event became an institution that today has a firm place in the political calendar.

Winning over politicians to support issues

“It is not about getting a taste of life in Berne. It is a question of political participation,” explains Micha Küchler, project manager

for the Youth Session at the Swiss National Youth Council. “I don't know of any other country that has anything like this.” The 200 or so participants, aged between 14 and 21, do not have a formal right to submit motions but their petitions have the same status as citizens' petitions. “The resolutions of the Youth Session cannot be ignored,” says Küchler.

Another route is via “Juse direct” (Youth Session direct). The principle is that young people attempt to win over a sitting National Councillor to support their issues. This was successful in the case of Lukas Reimann and the ban on private poker games. The St. Gallen SVP National Councillor submitted a motion to lift the ban, and private poker games are now permitted again.

Much has also been done in recent years at municipal and cantonal level to involve young people in politics. There are now cantonal youth parliaments throughout French-speaking Switzerland, Ticino and north-western Switzerland, with the exception of Neuchâtel. They are somewhat thinner on the ground in central and eastern Switzerland. Aargau, Schaffhausen, Uri and St. Gallen, along with the two Appenzells, are on board, while youth sessions take place every three years in Grisons and Thurgau. Political initiatives to establish youth parliaments are pending in Berne, Zurich and Lucerne. “We have set ourselves

cil at the age of 28. However, no Green Liberals under the age of 30 managed to win a seat in the 2011 elections. With an average age of 45.5, they nevertheless have a young team in Berne. The National Councillors of the Green Party had an average age of 49.5 in 2011, just slightly lower than that of the Liberals at 49.6. The Federal Council party with the highest average age at 52.7 years is Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf's Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), which broke away from the SVP. The SVP's average age is almost identical at 52.3 years. However, the National Councillors of the CVP (50.6 years) and the SP (48.7 years) are significantly younger.

Improved chances of election

Being young has long since been an asset rather than a disadvantage in politics. This is also reflected in the chances of election. "Younger candidates today have a much better chance of election than older ones," explains Werner Seitz. Candidates aged 25 to 34 achieved an election quota of 37 in 2011. This means that the number of people in this age group being elected was around one third the number of candidates in that age bracket. Among candidates aged 65 to 74, only one in 50 was elected. The under-forties are therefore less underrepresented in politics today than the over-sixties. "We live

in a society where being young is a major drawing card," says Werner Seitz. "That is no different in politics." The Zurich-based political scientist Michael Hermann believes the good electoral chances of young politicians are also explained by reconciliation between the generations after 1968. The generation of 1968 adopted the maxim "don't trust anyone over 30", but the older generation also mistrusted the young along the lines of "don't trust anyone under 30". "All that has changed," explains Hermann.

Asking young politicians how they explain their election produces some remarkably simple answers. "I was out campaigning on the streets almost every day," says the Green Party's Aline Trede. She distributed 40,000 voting cards. Céline Amaudruz, an up-and-coming SVP politician from Geneva, also emphasised her street campaign. Her high profile as cantonal party president and a member of Geneva's city council helped. Her profession also stood her in good stead among the bankers of Geneva – Amaudruz works as an asset manager. To sum up, face-to-face contact with the electorate is still an absolute must for anyone seeking election to the Federal Palace at the start of the 21st century, despite Facebook, Twitter and blogs.

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the target of establishing a youth parliament in every canton sooner or later," explains Maurus Blumenthal, director of the Swiss Federation of Youth Parliaments.

An award for shameful behaviour

There are also dozens of municipal and regional children's and youth parliaments. They usually deal with matters like skateboard parks, play areas, night buses and other pressing issues for children and young people. But they also tackle more serious political issues. The

Bernese children's parliament has twice awarded its "shameful behaviour prize" to the Bernese power plant operator BKW for its unfriendly attitude towards children. BKW had failed to decommission the Mühleberg nuclear power plant despite a German study concluding that the facility was not completely safe. The prize was a piranha made by the youngsters themselves. Other candidates were Berne's city council for making cutbacks in



Lucerne's youth parliament

They are all from French-speaking Switzerland. The Social Democrat Mathias Reynard, currently the youngest member of the National Council, took part in the youth parliament in Valais as a youngster. Olivier Feller, the Liberal National Councillor from Vaud, and Pierre Maudet, his 35-year-old party colleague from Geneva and executive council member, once helped to organise the Swiss youth parliament.

Parliamentarians under 40 (reference date 1 June 2013)

First name	Name	Party	Canton	YOB	Deputy since
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National Council

Sebastian	Frehner	SVP	BS	1973	2010
Toni	Brunner	SVP	SG	1974	1995
Andrea	Geissbühler	SVP	BE	1976	2007
Natalie	Rickli	SVP	ZH	1976	2007
Thomas	Aeschi	SVP	ZG	1979	2011
Céline	Amaudruz	SVP	GE	1979	2011
Nadja	Pieren	SVP	BE	1980	2011
Lukas	Reimann	SVP	SG	1982	2007
Evi	Allemann	SP	BE	1978	2003
Valérie	Piller	SP	FR	1978	2011
Jean Chr.	Schwaab	SP	VD	1979	2011
Nadine	Masshardt	SP	BE	1984	2013
Cédric	Wermuth	SP	AG	1986	2011
Mathias	Reynard	SP	VS	1987	2011
Olivier	Feller	FDP/Lib	VD	1974	2011
Christa	Markwalder	FDP/Lib	BE	1975	2003
Petra	Gössi	FDP/Lib	SZ	1976	2011
Andrea	Caroni	FDP/Lib	AR	1980	2011
Christian	Wasserfallen	FDP/Lib	BE	1981	2007
Stefan	Müller	CVP	SO	1976	2011
Yannick	Buttet	CVP	VS	1977	2011
Martin	Candinas	CVP	GR	1980	2011
Marco	Romano	CVP	TI	1982	2011
Thomas	Maier	GLP	ZH	1975	2011
Kathrin	Bertschy	GLP	BE	1979	2011
Tiana A.	Moser	GLP	ZH	1979	2007
Antonio	Hodgers	Greens	GE	1976	2007
Bastien	Girod	Greens	ZH	1980	2007
Aline	Trede	Greens	BE	1983	2013
Lorenzo	Quadri	Lega	TI	1974	2011

Council of States

Pascale	Bruderer	SP	AG	1977	2002
Raphaël	Comte	FDP/Lib	NE	1979	2010

schools and the city of Berne's parliament for withdrawing its support of the children's carnival and failing to provide funds for the soap box derby.

Whether the influx of young faces in politics in recent years is the result of the greater involvement of young people is something the organisers of the Youth Session of Parliament are currently trying to establish. Micha Küchler points to several former youth politicians who have now entered politics at a senior level.

They are all from French-speaking Switzerland. The Social Democrat Mathias Reynard, currently the youngest member of the National Council, took part in the youth parliament in Valais as a youngster. Olivier Feller, the Liberal National Councillor from Vaud, and Pierre Maudet, his 35-year-old party colleague from Geneva and executive council member, once helped to organise the Swiss youth parliament.