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The parliamentary and executive elections in Switzerland, 2015



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The 2015 federal elections in Switzerland brought a shift to the political right and re-established executive proportionality. Since this came about mainly via the weakening of the centre, the results also signal a return to a trend begun in the early 1990s, which temporarily stalled in 2011 (see [Mueller and Dardanelli, 2013](#)): a growth or at least (in the case of the left) a consolidation of the two pole-parties. These are, on the right, the national-conservative Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC, hereafter SVP), and the Socialist Party of Switzerland (SPS/PSS, hereafter SPS) on the left. The SVP gained both votes and seats in the National Council and increased its presence in the Swiss government to two seats (out of seven). It failed, however, to enlarge its delegation in the Council of States. The SPS, on the other hand, lost three seats in the National Council, but stabilized its overall vote share, increased its size in the prestigious (and equally powerful) Council of States and held on to its two executive seats with ease.

Other noteworthy facts include the gains of Switzerland's most traditional party, the Liberals (FDP/PLR, hereafter FDP), and the losses of both the "old" and the "new" centre parties. The FDP won additional votes and seats in both parliamentary chambers and, like the SPS, held on to its two government seats without disputes. However, Switzerland's second oldest party, the centrist Christian-Democrats (CVP/PDC, hereafter CVP), continued its decline, even if it managed to stand its ground in the Council of States and retain its

one seat in the Federal Council. The two other centre parties, the Green-Liberals (GLP/PVL, hereafter GLP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP/PBD, hereafter BDP), founded in 2007 and 2008, respectively, also lost both votes and seats.

These results paint a picture of increased polarisation and reduced fragmentation, and the return of the SVP to full executive strength might bode well for the stability of the country's institutions. However, the two houses of parliament are now dominated by different majorities, which might jeopardise consensus-finding – especially if executive proportionality is not matched by consociational behaviour ([Mueller et al., 2016](#)).

1. Electoral system

The Swiss parliament is perfectly bicameral, with the two houses enjoying equal powers. The 200 seats in the lower house, the National Council, are divided among the 26 Swiss cantons in proportion to their resident population. The 46 seats in the upper house, the Council of States, are distributed equally: two seats for every full, one seat for every half-canton (there are six half-cantons). For both houses, the cantons serve as electoral districts.

Members of the National Council are elected by an open list proportional representation system, except for the six smallest cantons with only one seat, where candidates are elected by plurality vote. Members of the Council of States are elected using a two-round majority system, except in Neuchâtel and Jura, which use proportional representation. Citizens in Appenzell Inner-Rhodes elect their only Councillor of State in the *Landsgemeinde* (annual open-air general assembly). Because elections to the Council of States are governed by cantonal law, cantons are free to decide on the electoral system.

Parliamentary elections take place every four years, in October. In their first session in December, the two chambers hold a joint session to elect the executive, the Federal Council. The Federal Council consists of seven members, elected for four years but not revocable in the meantime. Candidates need not be parliamentarians; any Swiss citizen with voting rights is eligible. Each of the

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Table 1
Results of the Swiss parliamentary elections, October/November 2015.

	National council				Council of states	
	Votes %	Change 2011–15	Seats	Change 2011–15	Seats	Change 2011–15
Swiss people's party (SVP/UDC)	29.4	+2.8	65	+11	5	–
Socialist party (SPS/PSS)	18.8	+0.1	43	–3	12	+1
Liberal-radical party (FDP/PLR)	16.4	+1.3	33 ^a	+3	13	+2
Christian democratic party (CVP/PDC)	11.6	–0.7	27	–1	13	–
Green party (GPS/PES)	7.1	–1.3	11	–4	1	–1
Green-liberal party (GLP/PVL)	4.6	–0.8	7	–5	0	–2
Conservative democratic party (BDP/PBD)	4.1	–1.3	7	–2	1	–
Evangelical people's party (EVP/PEV)	1.9	–0.1	2	–		
League of the Ticinesi (Lega) ^b	1	+0.2	2	–		
Labour party (PdA/PdT)	0.9	–	1	+1		
Genevan citizens' Movement (MCG) ^c	0.3	–0.1	1	–		
Others/independents	3.9	–0.1	1 ^d	–	1 ^e	–
Total	100	–	200	–	46	–

Source: Federal Office for Statistics, <http://www.bfs.admin.ch> (last accessed 10 January 2016).

^a Includes one MP from the Liberal Party (LP) of Basel-City.

^b Stood only in Ticino.

^c Stood only in Geneva.

^d CSP Obwalden, but part of the CVP's parliamentary group.

^e Independent, but part of the SVP's parliamentary group.

seven seats is filled in turn, according to the seniority of its holder; vacancies are filled last. Candidates are elected by majority vote in however many rounds it takes for one to reach an absolute majority (124 votes if all 246 MPs cast a valid vote). After the second round, candidates with fewer than 10 votes are excluded; from the third round onwards, the candidate with the least votes is excluded and votes for excluded or new candidates are invalid. Voting for all seven seats is secret and takes place the same day. As no party alone has a majority in parliament, each candidate needs to attract cross-party support to be elected.

2. Campaign

As in every election year, the SVP dominated the campaign, (supposedly) in terms of financial means as well as in content.¹ Continuing its strategy of 2011, the party promoted, in an extensive nationwide campaign, an anti-EU stance and restrictive policies towards asylum and immigration (see Bühlmann et al., 2016). And like in 2011 (see Mueller and Dardanelli, 2013), the party could build on an important success at the ballot: in February 2014, a narrow majority of the voting population (50.3%) and 17 out of 26 cantons accepted the SVP's initiative “against mass immigration”, forcing the Swiss government to renegotiate the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons with the EU within three years (i.e. by February 2017) – and risking the cancellation of the so called “Bilateral Agreements I” with the EU.²

However, given the high news-value of that initiative (see Bühlmann et al., 2015) and its potentially far-reaching consequences, it is surprising how little relations with the EU have been brought up by the other parties in the forefront of the elections. The Liberals, themselves guiding an extensive nationwide campaign by means of newspaper advertisements, rarely referred to the Bilateral Agreements. And while the BDP made the preservation of the Bilateral Agreements a core issue of its campaign, the unequal distribution of campaign means prevented their position from

reaching a wider audience. Similarly, the Greens advocated a more humanitarian position towards asylum seekers but in doing so, they were standing alone, since the Social Democrats focused on social welfare issues.

Like in 2011, external events received substantial media attention over summer 2015 and might have influenced voters' perceptions in the forefront of the October elections. The sharp increase in asylum seekers in Europe coincided with an augmentation of more than 10 percentage points in support for the statement that the issues of asylum and immigration are the most important problem.³ In contrast, the second most mentioned problem, the Bilateral Agreements with the EU, received only 7% of support (Longchamp et al., 2015a,b). The situation was different in 2011, when, in the wake of the Fukushima incident, the Swiss citizenry grew more concerned about environmental and energy issues (Longchamp et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, the 2015 electoral campaign was one where substantive issues rarely gained traction. Two circumstances might have led to this fact. First, practically every party had advanced its own popular initiative ahead of the 2011 elections in order to gain attention for its core topics. However, given that almost all of these initiatives failed at the ballot or already at the stage of signature collection,⁴ it is not surprising that by 2015, parties did not pursue this strategy anymore. Second, the SVP launched an extensive commercial music video production, starring their most prominent party exponents but with content glaringly missing. The song attracted a lot of attention and even entered the top-10 of the single charts. Also, in order to advertise that campaign video, the SVP bought the first two pages of the most widely read Swiss newspaper, “20 Minuten”. This, together with the supposedly expensive music video production, made the inequalities in campaign funding between the parties more evident than ever.

¹ In Switzerland, parties are not required to disclose their campaign funding.

² Although not a member of the EU, Switzerland is closely linked to it through a series of treaties. The most important ones are the Bilateral Agreements I (of 1999; including the free movement of persons and research, amongst others) and II (of 2004; including Schengen/Dublin, amongst others).

³ While in early June, 34% of the survey respondents affirmed this statement, this percentage mounted to 46% in late August (Longchamp et al., 2015a,b).

⁴ The notable exception is the SVP initiative “against mass immigration”, see above.

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