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Notes on Recent Elections

The Swiss federal elections of 2007

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The Swiss federal elections of 2007 were among the most bitter and dramatic the country has experienced in its 160-year history as a federal state.¹ The trend towards polarisation, visible for the past 15 years, progressed further and reached a spectacular climax in the executive elections which brought to an end the consensual style of politics of the past 50 years. The elections for the lower house saw the largest gains made by the two parties located at the opposite ends of the political spectrum: the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC, hereafter referred to simply as SVP) on the right and the Greens (GPS/PES) on the left. The Greens also performed strongly in the upper house elections, gaining representation for the first time, while the SVP did less well and lost one seat. The most dramatic outcome was produced by the elections for the executive, which saw the SVP's leader Christoph Blocher failing to win re-election and his party in response deciding to withdraw into opposition. Although neither the balance of forces in parliament nor the political complexion of the executive have significantly altered, Blocher's eviction and the SVP's confrontational policy seem likely to introduce considerable instability into Swiss politics over the next four years. While the country is not yet facing a change of regime, it is certainly at a critical juncture.

1. Background

Switzerland is a federal republic combining perfect bicameralism, semi-presidentialism, and the extensive use of direct democracy.² The 200-seat lower house of parliament, the National Council, represents the Swiss people as a whole, while the 46-seat upper house, the Council of States, represents the cantons. Both are directly elected on a cantonal basis, so the only real difference between them is that National Council seats are allocated to cantons in proportion to population size, whereas each canton has two seats in the Council of States regardless of its population.³

The electoral system for the lower house is an open list system of proportional representation that allows for a considerable degree of preferential voting. Because many cantons are small, the average district magnitude is rather small, and the overall proportionality of the system is lower than in many other PR systems. There is not a uniform electoral system for the Council of States as this is a matter of cantonal law, but all cantons bar one use a two-round majority system. Most cantons hold elections for the Council of States at the same time as the election for the National Council, but two cantons and one half canton hold them some months before. Apart from those exceptions, federal parliamentary elections are held every four years on the third Sunday in October, in this case on 21 October 2007.

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¹ On the two previous federal elections, in 1999 and 2003, see Linder and Lutz (2002) and Dardanelli (2005), respectively.

² For an introduction to the Swiss political system, see Church (2004) and Klöti et al. (2007).

³ There are six cantons which, for historical reasons, are called half-cantons and have one seat only.

The seven-member collegial executive, the Federal Council, is elected in the December following the federal election. Once elected, the Federal Council cannot be brought down by the parliament. The absence of the confidence link with parliament means that the Swiss system falls in between parliamentary and presidential systems. The seven federal councillors are elected in turn, and each of them needs a majority in parliament – with the two houses sitting jointly – to be elected. If this is not the case in the first round, other rounds follow until a winner emerges as weaker candidates withdraw. As no party has a commanding majority in parliament, each candidate needs to attract cross-party support to attain a majority. By a longstanding convention, incumbent federal councillors are almost always re-elected if they wish to remain in office.

2. Electoral campaign

The campaign was one of the most bitter and confrontational in living memory. As in 2003, it was aggressively framed by the SVP, which, despite being fully represented in the executive, campaigned as an ‘outsider’, at odds with ‘the establishment’. The party’s campaign centred once again on law and order, taxation, immigration, hostility to the EU and nationalist conservatism in general. A poster publicising its initiative for the expulsion of foreign citizens convicted of serious crimes attracted widespread condemnation – both domestically and abroad – for its perceived racist undertones, and even triggered street riots in Berne in the last stages of the campaign. Once again, the party conducted the most professional and ruthless campaign. The vast sums spent by the SVP, widely believed to come from Blocher’s personal fortune, and the lack of regulation of campaign spending came under close scrutiny.

The Socialists (SPS/PSS, hereafter SPS) and the Greens openly campaigned against the re-election of Blocher to the Federal Council, and for an extra seat for the left in the executive. The SVP reacted by denouncing such manoeuvres as a vast left-wing conspiracy and, as the campaign progressed, focused increasingly on its leader, equating a vote for the SVP as a vote in support of Blocher. The Greens conducted a spirited campaign and were able to capitalise on the salience of environmental issues to present a credible alternative to the SP on the left. In this polarised and confrontational atmosphere, the two centrist parties – the Christian Democrats (CVP/PDC, hereafter CVP) and the Radicals (FDP/PRD, hereafter FDP) – were unable to present a clear and visible profile to voters. This was particularly the case for the latter, which also suffered from the lack of charisma of its leader, Fulvio Pelli, and the deep unpopularity of its Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin. The CVP, in contrast, did derive some benefit from the popularity of Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard, and from its family-focussed discourse.

3. National Council results

Although its progress slowed down, the SVP won the election for the lower house even more emphatically than in 2003 (Table 1). The party attracted almost a third of the votes, up 2.3% points on 2003, and won 62 seats, an

Table 1

Results of the 2007 National Council election in Switzerland

	Votes (%)	Change from 2003	Seats	Change from 2003
Swiss People's Party [SVP/UDC]	29.0	+2.3	62	+7
Socialist Party [SPS/PSS]	19.5	–3.9	43	–9
Radical Democratic Party [FDP/PRD]	15.6	–1.7	31	–5
Christian Democratic Party [CVP/PDC]	14.6	+0.3	31	+3
Government parties	(78.7)	(–3)	(167)	(–4)
Green Party [GPS/PES]	9.6	+2.0	20	+8
Liberal Party [LPS/PLS]	1.8	–0.4	4	0
Liberal Green Party [GLP] ^a	1.4	+1.4	3	+2
Evangelical People's Party [EVP/PEV]	2.4	–0.1	2	–1
Federal Democratic Union [EDU/UDF]	1.3	0.0	1	–1
Workers' Party [PdA/PST]	0.7	–0.2	1	–1
Christian Social Party [CSP/PCS]	0.4	0.0	1	0
League of the Ticinese [LdT]	0.5	+0.1	1	0
Others	3.2	+2.0	0	–3
Non-government parties	(21.3)	(+3)	(33)	(+4)
Total	100.0		200	
Turnout	48.9%	+3.7		

Source: Swiss Federal Chancellery and Swiss Federal Parliament.

^a Party took part in the federal election for the first time in 2007, presenting candidates in Zurich and St Gallen only. One of its three members was elected in 2003 as a member of the GPS.

increase of seven. No party had ever won so many National Council seats since the introduction of proportional representation in 1919. Equally emphatic, and largely unexpected, was the Socialists’ defeat. Their share of the vote dropped 3.9 points to below 20%, and their party grouping in the lower house lost nine members. While in 2003 the two largest parties were more or less neck and neck, there is now a nearly 20-seat gap between them. The other major loser was the FDP. While its share of the vote declined by only 1.7% points, the party won only 31 seats, down five compared to 2003. This is the worst ever result for what used to be Switzerland’s ‘natural party of government’. In contrast, the Christian Democrats managed to reverse their recent downward trend and attracted 14.6% of the vote, marginally up on the previous election. This secured them three extra seats, giving a total of 31 that matches the size of the Radical group.

The other winners of the election were the Greens, whose share of the vote fell just short of 10% and whose seat tally jumped to 20, seven up from 2003. Meanwhile, the Liberal Greens – a start-up centrist ecological party born of a secession from the Green party – won three seats despite only fielding candidates in two cantons. In its Zurich heartland, the new party took 7% of the vote (compared to 10% won by the left-wing Greens), an impressive result by any standard. The Liberals managed to hold onto their four seats, despite a further decline in their vote share, but the other minor parties suffered a general loss of support and some will not be represented in this parliament.

In aggregate terms, the results indicate a gain for right-wing parties, a weakening of the left, and overall stability

for the centre. Within the latter, though, the balance of forces between the centre-right and the centre-left is tilted in favour of the latter. To an extent, then, the process of polarisation, which had been largely symmetrical over the last 15 years or so, continued on the right side of the spectrum but was overall held in check on the opposite side. A similarly mixed picture emerges with regard to the process of concentration. Together, the governing parties lost 3% points and four seats, but if we broaden the analysis to include the five largest parties, their share of the vote fell by only 1% point, and their seat tally increased by three. Moreover, the total number of parties represented in the lower house has been reduced to 12 from 14. Turnout increased for the third election in succession, to 48.9%.

4. Council of States results

Five seats were allocated before the National Council election, 32 seats were allocated in the first round on 21 October, and nine seats went to the second round. The CVP won 15 seats, the FDP 12, the SPS nine, the SVP seven, the Greens two and the Liberal Greens one (Table 2). Winning the same number of seats as in the previous election, the Christian Democrats confirmed their position as the largest party. The Socialists also maintained their position, while the Radicals lost two seats and the SVP one. The novelty was the entry of the Greens and the Liberal Greens, neither of whom had previously been represented in the upper house. In contrast to the National Council elections, thus, these results signal a setback for the SVP and a moderate shift to the left in aggregate terms. This is best explained by the workings of the electoral system – which penalises more extreme parties such as the SVP – as well as by a degree of backlash against the latter in the second-round elections in Zurich and Vaud. This outcome also indicates a change of direction compared to 2003, when the SPS and the SVP gained ground at the expense of the moderate parties. The CVP and the FDP were thus able to maintain a combined majority for the centre. Turnout was generally up and averaged 46.3% across 20 cantons.

5. Federal Council results

The run up to the Federal Council elections was dominated by the issue of Blocher's re-election. Until the day

Table 2
Results of the 2007 Council of States election in Switzerland

	Seats	Change from 2003
Christian Democratic Party [CVP/PDC]	15	0
Radical Democratic Party [FDP/PRD]	12	-2
Socialist Party [SPS/PSS]	9	0
Swiss People's Party [SVP/UDC]	7	-1
Green Party [GPS/PES]	2	+2
Liberal Green Party [GLP]	1	+1
Total	46	
Average turnout	46.3% ^a	

Source: Swiss Federal Parliament.

^a Average of 20 cantons. Data for Appenzell-Inner Rhodes, Argovia, Zug and Zurich are not yet available, and candidates in Nidwalden and Obwalden were re-elected uncontested.

before the elections, the SPS and the Greens were understood as wanting to put forward Luc Recordon – a newly elected Green member of the upper house – against Blocher. The CVP let it be known that they would not try to win back a second seat, but also that – unlike the FDP – they would not support Blocher's re-election. Then, the night before the elections, all three centre and left parties – SPS, Greens and CVP – decided to withdraw Recordon and to give their support to Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, the little-known SVP finance minister in the Graubünden cantonal government. Despite these manoeuvres, until the last minute most observers expected Blocher to be re-elected.

On 12 December, the first four seats were filled in the first round along the expected lines, with large majorities for Pascal Couchepin (FDP) and Samuel Schmid (SVP) and narrower wins, especially compared with 2003, for Moritz Leuenberger (SPS) and Micheline Calmy-Rey (SPS). The two socialists clearly paid the price of their party's anti-Blocher strategy, receiving no support from the SVP. But then came the *coup de théâtre*: Widmer-Schlumpf was elected against Blocher by 125 votes to 115 in a second round of voting. Widmer-Schlumpf was not a member of parliament, was not even in Berne at the time of her election, and asked for a day of reflection before accepting her post. Meanwhile, the SVP tried and failed to have the proceedings suspended. In elections for the last two seats, Hans-Rudolf Merz (FDP) and Doris Leuthard (CVP) were easily confirmed, the former with a very large majority and the latter with a much smaller one (Table 3). The CVP Councillor also paid the penalty for her party's contribution in ousting Blocher. The SVP carried out its threat by not recognising the two SVP councillors as party representatives, excluding them from the parliamentary group and announcing a policy of opposition. Lastly, the CVP candidate, Corina Casanova, was elected Federal Chancellor – the top government civil servant.

Table 3
Results of the Federal Council election, Switzerland 2007

	Votes	First elected	Party	Canton	Language	Gender
Moritz Leuenberger	157	1995	SPS	Zurich	German	Male
Pascal Couchepin	205	1998	FDP	Valais	French	Male
Samuel Schmid	201	2000	SVP ^a	Berne	German	Male
Micheline Calmy-Rey	153	2002	SPS	Geneva	French	Female
Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf	125	2007	SVP ^a	Graubünden	German	Female
Hans-Rudolf Merz	213	2003	FDP	Appenzell-AR	German	Male
Doris Leuthard	160	2006	CVP	Argovia	German	Female

Source: Swiss Federal Chancellery; Notes: Listed by chronological order for the 12 December election.

^a The party does not recognise these councillors as its own representatives and has excluded them from the parliamentary group.

6. Discussion

The National Council elections were clearly a victory for the SVP – and to a lesser extent the Greens – and a defeat for the Socialists and the Radicals. The SVP's performance was undeniably impressive. Between 1995 and 2007 the party has more than doubled its share of seats in the lower house, and totally eliminated any form of competition on its right. It has demonstrated a remarkable ability to mobilise its core electorate – also reflected in the increase in turnout – and has fully established itself in the *Suisse romande* to the point of being the largest party in the two core cantons of Vaud and Geneva. However, the results of the other elections, as well as trends over time, paint a more nuanced picture. The SVP's progress slowed (increases of 2.3 points and seven seats between 2003 and 2007, compared to gains of 4.2 points and 11 seats between 1999 and 2003, and still bigger gains between 1995 and 1999). At the same time, the party's difficulties in building broader coalitions and in attracting cross-party support for its candidates were clearly exposed. Given the SVP's progressive homogenisation – with the Blocherist faction gradually suppressing dissenting views – and its decision to isolate itself in opposition, observers may wonder whether the SVP has peaked. Moreover, given the increasing identification of the party with its leader, another question raised is just what a post-Blocher future might look like.

On the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, the Socialists suffered a setback and are now facing for the first time a credible alternative on the left. Their election results seem to indicate that the party's progress over the last 20 years or so has come to an end. However, the Greens could also prove valuable allies, and the CVP's increasing willingness to work with these two parties has arguably strengthened the left as a whole. The successful ousting of Blocher from the executive provided a powerful demonstration of what a centre-left alliance can achieve. The FDP can also point to positives despite its defeat in the parliamentary elections. Not only did its two federal councillors hold on to their seats, but they received much larger majorities than in 2003 and were selected as President and Vice-president. Moreover, the self-imposed isolation of the SVP is likely to strengthen the FDP's profile, not least as a voice of the business community. Meanwhile, the Christian Democrats emerge stronger from these elections: they managed to reverse their electoral decline, to attract the Liberal Greens into their parliamentary group, to strengthen their position as the pivotal party, and to secure the important position of Federal Chancellor.

Overall, the balance of power in the National Council has remained broadly stable, and the policy decisions of the lower house will depend a great deal on the nature of the SVP's opposition. Never before has the largest party been

excluded from government and so it is very difficult to predict that party's future behaviour. However, given the strong foundations of consensual politics in Switzerland, in both institutions and the wider political culture, it is likely that the SVP's opposition in the wake of the elections will be measured rather than belligerent. The continuing centrist control of the Council of States also points in the direction of policy moderation, as does the political complexion of the new Federal Council. Despite the furore caused by her ousting of Christoph Blocher, Widmer-Schlumpf has a clearly conservative track record in cantonal politics and so the policy balance in the executive has not been fundamentally altered. The likeliest source of policy instability is therefore the increased use of direct democracy, a course the SVP is liable to advocate wherever possible. Even there, however, the party's positions on most policy issues – with the partial exception of immigration and security – are still quite far removed from those of the median voter, so the SVP is unlikely to score many victories. That said, one proposal which the party intends to put to the voters, for the direct election of the Federal Council, would if carried have profound consequences for the workings of the Swiss political system.

7. Conclusion

The 2007 elections produced dramatic results and created a situation unprecedented in the Swiss political system. While public policy is not likely to be significantly affected in the short term, government and politics over the next four years will be significantly different from the patterns which prevailed over the last 50 years. Christoph Blocher will remain a central figure in Swiss politics, and the battle for the 'soul' of the country will intensify. Many see this as a change of regime, signalling the dawn of a new era of adversarial politics. Conversely, it may be that Blocher's downfall signifies the beginning of the end for the SVP's bid to transform Swiss politics.

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