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Abstract

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National Elections in Switzerland: an Introduction

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A particular case

From a cross-national perspective, Swiss elections do indeed possess several distinctive features. First and foremost, turnout rates have recently oscillated around 45 percent, making them among the lowest in national elections worldwide. This fact is particularly puzzling since Switzerland is one of the oldest democracies, one of the most affluent countries and has a proportional representation (PR) electoral system, which are all factors that are generally believed to boost turnout (e.g. Norris 2004). Low turnout has been ascribed, first, to the emphasis on direct democracy in the Swiss constitution. Referendums and initiatives, it has been argued, provide citizens with extensive opportunities to exert institutionalised political influence beyond the parliamentary channel, thus rendering parliamentary elections less consequential than in purely representative systems (e.g. Wernli 2001). Furthermore, the extreme frequency of ballots – the Swiss federation holds three or four direct democratic votes a year, not to mention the numerous additional cantonal and local ballots – is suspected of having produced voter fatigue (e.g. Lijphart 1997). Secondly, some authors have blamed low turnout in Switzerland to a lack of what they call “executive responsiveness” (Powell 2000; Franklin 2004). Indeed, an informal agreement among the four governmental parties known as the Zauberformel (Magic Formula) has, until recently, ensured that, for a period of over 40 years, shifts in political parties’ electoral fortunes did not have any
consequences for government composition. While the Magic Formula has been a constituent feature of Switzerland’s successful consociational type of democracy (Lijphart 1969, 2004), it may well have spoiled the party from the viewpoint of the voters, and may thus have depressed electoral participation. Finally, low turnout in Switzerland has also been interpreted as an after-effect of the late enfranchisement of women, who did not enter the national electoral arena until 1971 (Franklin 2004; Wernli 2001). Therefore, the Swiss electorate at present is still composed of a substantive share of voters who presumably did not acquire the necessary participatory tendency during their formative years.

Apart from low turnout, national elections in Switzerland have also been claimed as the least ‘nationalised’ elections in Western Europe (Caramani 2004). Party support and turnout have been found to be highly regionalised, which suggests, according to the literature on the nationalisation of politics (see Schattschneider [1960] 1997; Stokes 1976), that voters have been reacting to local rather than to national political stimuli in terms of parties, candidates, and issues. This observation has been interpreted as a consequence of the high degree of social and cultural heterogeneity among Swiss regions. Switzerland features a high regional variability, for example, in terms of language (there are four official languages) and religious denominations (see Germann 1999; Vatter 2002). The Röstigraben, i.e. the language barrier between the German-speaking and the Latin regions, finds its expression, among other things, in vast differences in direct legislative voting behaviour, with the latter being generally more liberal on foreign policy issues and more supportive of the welfare state than the former (Linder 1999). This cultural heterogeneity is also reflected by a highly cantonalized party system (Klöti 1998). In fact, none of the 15 parties which are presently represented in the national parliament ran lists or candidates in all of the 26 electoral districts in the 2003 national elections. On the contrary, most of these parties have very focused regional strongholds, of which the Lega dei Ticinesi – which only presented a list in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino - is but the most prominent example (see Swiss Federal Statistical Office 2003). Moreover, even those parties with territorially widespread electoral support, i.e. the Liberals (FDP), the Christian Democrats (CVP), the Social Democrats (SP), and the People’s Party (SVP), are characterized by a low degree of organisational centralisation and programmatic homogeneity (Ladner 1999). One can indeed speak of 26 different cantonal political systems within one nation (Vatter 2002). Another factor which, presumably, has contributed to the scattered party landscape is the electoral system. Formally, all the 200 members of the National Council, i.e. the lower chamber of the parliament, are elected by PR according to the Hagenbach-Bischoff rules (see Lutz and Selb [forthcoming]; Lutz and Strohmann 1998).1 However, there are important variations in district
magnitudes, since the number of seats for the national parliament depends on the size of the electorate in the cantons, each of which forms an electoral district. The median weighting is relatively low (5 seats) in Switzerland, with a maximum of 34 seats (Zurich) and a minimum of one seat (Appenzell Outer-Rhodes, Appenzell Inner-Rhodes, Glarus, Nidwalden, Obwalden, and Uri). Therefore, PR shrinks to de facto plurality in these 6 single-member districts. Varying district magnitudes, in turn, confront parties and citizens with distinct incentives to compete and to vote (e.g. Taagepera and Shugart 1989), and low district weightings and/or majoritarian electoral formulas are known to give rise to smaller party systems than are more proportional electoral systems.

Recent developments

Current developments have begun to undermine some of the aforementioned peculiarities. Most notably, the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) has increasingly changed its image from that of a conservative, Protestant and rural party into that of a right-wing populist force (e.g. Sciarini et al. 2003). Over the past three elections, the SVP has almost doubled its electoral support, from 15 percent in 1995 to 27 percent in 2003 (for an overview of the developments between 1995 and 2003, see Farago 1996; Hirter 2000; Selb and Lachat 2004). Within the same period, it has also evolved from a markedly regional party that, in 1995, ran in only 16 of the 26 electoral districts into a truly national party that entered races in all but three of the cantons in 2003 (see Kriesi et al. 2005). The SVP’s rise has culminated in the reshuffling of the Magic Formula after the federal elections in October 2003, when the two chambers of the newly assembled national parliament elected a second SVP-representative onto the seven-member government, at the expense of the centrist Christian Democrats. Thus, a trend that has been observed in many other established democracies, namely the rise of populist parties (Betz and Immerfall 1998), has led to a novel situation, in which the Swiss electorate is today confronted with a much more polarised, competitive, and nationalised party system than it was decades ago. At the same time, the tremendous rise of the SVP presents another Swiss particularity to electoral researchers: in a cross-national comparative perspective, the SVP is the most successful populist party, and, as opposed to other parties such as Austria’s FPÖ, it seems to have managed the balancing act between participation in the

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1 As to the 46 members of the Council of States, i.e. the upper house of the parliament, 20 cantons elect two members, and the 6 so-called half-cantons (Obwalden, Nidwalden, Basle-Town, Basle-Country, Appenzell Outer-Rhodes, Appenzell Inner-Rhodes) elect one member each. All the constituencies apart from Jura, which uses PR, elect their Councillors of State by majority (see Lutz and Selb [forthcoming]; Lutz and Strohmann 1998).
national government and the fundamental rhetorical opposition against the established political elites with flying colours.

The aims of this special issue

In this special issue, we will address questions related to both the traditional peculiarities and the recent developments in Swiss national elections. In doing so, we intend, first, to carry on the research efforts that have been initiated within the framework of the Swiss Electoral Studies (SELECTS). SELECTS was launched at the time of the 1995 federal elections and has led to a new beginning for the previously neglected area of electoral research in Switzerland (see Farago 1995; Kriesi 1998). We intend thus to provide a sequel to two earlier books emanating from SELECTS: the seminal volume on the Swiss national elections of 1995 edited by Kriesi, Linder and Klöti (1998), and the follow-up on the national elections of 1999 by Sciarini, Hardmeier and Vatter (2003). Second, although this special issue does not include any explicitly cross-national comparative work, our aim is to provide comparative researchers with an overview over the (sometimes misconceived) peculiarities of elections in Switzerland. Finally, we try to take full advantage of what, according to Harold Gosnell (1930), makes Switzerland a “unique place for political experiments”. Many of the papers included in this volume exploit Switzerland’s peculiarities in electoral institutions and socio-cultural settings in order to tackle research questions that are truly comparative in nature, and therefore provide theoretical insight that, as we believe, may prove relevant well beyond Switzerland’s narrow borders.

An overview of the articles

Although the contributions to this special issue are all stand-alone articles, they can nevertheless be broadly categorised into four substantial blocs. Hence the first set of contributions covers the effects of the subnational variations in electoral institutions and social and cultural contexts. A second set of articles presents an alternative view of consociational democracy in Switzerland. The third section addresses the issue of voter mobilisation in Swiss national elections. Finally, there are two papers that focus on the gender gap in voter participation and party choice.
Cantonal variability

It has often been argued that, due to Switzerland’s pronounced federal nature, as well as its regional variability in social cleavages and in institutional settings, national elections are better conceived of as ‘a series of parallel cantonal elections’ (e.g. Kerr 1987; Kriesi 1998). Three articles in this collection examine how these differences affect various dimensions of voting behaviour.

BÜHLMANN and FREITAG’s contribution focuses on political participation. The two authors start with the observation that there are huge differences in turnout rates across cantons: the cantons vary from 25% (Glarus) to 63% (Schaffhausen). The authors show that cantonal properties in fact exert substantial effects on individual participation: compulsory voting (in Schaffhausen), for example, fosters individual participation; in addition, the higher the party competition and the stronger Catholicism are in a canton, the higher is an individual’s propensity to go to the polls – irrespective of the individual’s characteristics and resources. Of course, these individual resources and characteristics (BÜHLMANN and FREITAG mainly mention marital status, party membership, party ties, residential stability, frequency of political discussion, trust in the national parliament, satisfaction with the political system, and the opinion that voting is a civic duty) influence the individual’s propensity to vote in an important manner. However, it appears that cantonal properties also affect the strength of the impact of these individual characteristics and resources on the participation decision: strong Catholicism in a canton, for instance, weakens the positive effect of party ties on individual participation. With their findings, BÜHLMANN and FREITAG clearly show the obligation for future research to take context into account in studies of political participation.

SELB reverses the conception of Swiss national elections as a series of parallel cantonal elections, and asks whether and to what extent cantonal elections are, in fact, national races. It has become commonplace in comparative electoral research to view regional as well as midterm, supra-national, and by-elections as ‘barometer elections’ (Anderson and Ward 1996) or ‘second order national elections’ (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This basically implies that voters use these admittedly less important elections as a vehicle for expressing their discontent about the performance of the national government. SELB demonstrates that the conception of regional elections as second-order national elections does not hold, since shared government as practiced in Switzerland weakens the signal which political and economic conditions provide about the competence of the incumbent parties. Instead, cantonal election outcomes in Switzerland seem to be, to some extent, snapshots of national trends in party support in nationally well-integrated cantons, while in more peripheral regions they are more properly conceived of
as expressions of regional ebbs and flows in parties’ electoral fortunes. Moreover, SELB shows how important changes in the strategic context provided by electoral institutions are in explaining diverging outcomes of national and regional parliamentary elections.

The point of departure for LACHAT’s paper is the puzzling observation that the SVP’s electoral success over the past elections has been limited to the National Council, while the partisan composition of the Council of States has remained more or less stable over time. LACHAT shows that the most obvious explanations for these differences between the two houses do not hold: it seems that neither the parties’ decisions on whether or not to compete, nor the mechanical effects of the different electoral systems (PR versus majority), can explain the varying degrees of the SVP’s success. LACHAT, combining macro-level information on electoral results and survey-data from SELECTS 1995 to 2003, instead offers an alternative individual level explanation: strategic voting behaviour. Split-ticket voting is more widespread among voters of the SVP than of other parties of the upper house. The weakness of this party in the Council of States can therefore be explained – at least partially – by the fact that voters often prefer to discard their second vote for the Council of States rather then giving it to the SVP. Indeed, LACHAT shows that the Swiss case – taking the particular properties of the two-chamber system into account – offers fruitful possibilities for analysing individual strategic voting behaviour.

Consociational democracy

Switzerland is often quoted as a paradigmatic case of a successful consociational democracy (e.g. Lijphart 1969, 2004). The search for compromise is visible, among others, in the Magic Formula of the composition of the federal government, which includes representatives of the four largest political parties. The impressive rise of the SVP over the past three elections and the resulting polarisation of the Swiss party system has, however, led many pundits to speculate about the future feasibility of the Swiss model of consensual democracy.

On this account, CHRISTIN and SCHULZ ask whether the Swiss voters appreciate or punish consensual politicizing by their elected representatives. In order to answer this question, they ingeniously combine data from different sources – SELECTS surveys, parliamentary roll call votes, and official election statistics – and re-phrase their research question in terms of the traditional ‘proximity model’ of the vote choice versus the competing ‘directional model’ of voting behaviour. The proximity model states that a voter chooses parties that hold policy and ideological positions that are similar to their own positions (e.g. Downs 1957). The directional model claims that voters, within a certain region of acceptability, prefer parties that hold even more pronounced policy views than themselves, since these parties are
considered better suited to overcome the inertia of party politics, and can thus pull a respective policy into the preferred direction (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). CHRISTIN and SCHULZ find empirical support for both the proximity as well as the directional model. However, the voting behaviour of voters on the left side of the ideological space is more adequately described by the directional model, while voters on the right seem rather to conform to the proximity model. In other words, the SVP’s success cannot be attributed to moderate voters who punish consensual politicizing.

STOJANOVIC, for his part, challenges a key assertion of the consociationalists. According to consociational theory, PR constitutes the optimal electoral system for ensuring an adequate representation of minorities in parliament in multicultural societies (e.g. Lijphart 2004). However, STOJANOVIC proposes a different reading of the Swiss case and argues that the choice of an electoral formula (PR vs. majoritarian rules) does not per se have an effect on the representation of the different linguistic groups in the Swiss parliament. According to STOJANOVIC, territoriality (i.e. the definition of electoral districts), rather than PR, constitutes the key element to achieving proportional representation. If the different linguistic groups are territorially concentrated and the electoral districts reflect the geographic distribution of the groups, adequate group representation in parliament can be achieved with majoritarian rules as well as with PR. Three pieces of evidence support the claim that, in Switzerland, adequate representation is not necessarily achieved through PR. First, in the Council of States, proportional representation of the linguistic groups is the result of a combination of a majoritarian electoral system and territorial concentration of minorities. Secondly, the change of electoral systems from majoritarian to PR in 1919 hardly had an impact on the adequate representation of linguistic groups in the lower house. Finally, the linguistically most fragmented canton, i.e. the Grisons, elects its cantonal parliament entirely by majoritarian rule—contrary to what would be expected on the basis of consociational theory. Here, proportional representation of the linguistic groups is ensured through geographical concentration of the groups and a large number of districts of small magnitude. For STOJANOVIC, it is thus not appropriate to consider Switzerland as a prime example of a multicultural society where consociationalism between the different linguistic groups is the result of PR. However, as the author himself concludes, the question remains open whether PR still constitutes the best electoral system for more deeply divided multicultural states.

Party mobilisation

Party mobilisation is particularly interesting to study in the Swiss context. First, direct democracy constitutes one of the main distinctive features of the Swiss political system. As a consequence, next to elections, a series of regular ballots
takes place in which citizens vote on various policy issues. Political parties thus do not only campaign in the short period preceding a general election, but have several opportunities throughout the legislative period to mobilise their electorate on different political issues. Second, many observers have speculated whether the remarkable success of the SVP over the past elections is rooted in mobilisation advantages of the SVP over other parties.

The first article in this section deals with the influence of issue preferences on political mobilization in a context characterized by direct democracy. The pervasive character of parties’ political communications in Switzerland has pushed NICOLET and SCIARINI to tackle the question of the long-term influence of issue preferences on party choice. SELECTS 2003 collected panel data on individuals interviewed at the time of the 1999 and 2003 federal elections. This data set allows the authors, for the first time in Switzerland, to study stability and change in voters’ preferences between two elections. NICOLET and SCIARINI’s study stresses the importance of mediating factors for the impact of issue preferences. Their results first show that issues need to address pressing problems, need to be politically central, and need to be highly polarizing to matter for stability and change in party choice. Secondly, their findings highlight the role of the party profile as a factor mediating the influence of issue opinions. Issue positions more significantly affect the vote for parties that are more strongly profiled on them. These results are in line with the ones uncovered in studies on the short-term impact of issue-voting in Switzerland (Kriesi and Sciarini 2004). The similarity of results between the short-term and long-term effects of issue preferences on party choice sheds some light on the importance of political parties’ efforts to permanently communicate their messages to their voters. At the same time, NICOLET and SCIARINI’s contribution raises the question of the extent to which long-term effects of issue preferences are specific to direct-democratic systems, or whether they are also at work in classic parliamentary democracies.

Subsequently, LUTZ asks to what extent the SVP’s electoral success goes back to a relative mobilisation advantage over the other parties, and compares the party potentials to the actual outcomes of the 2003 elections. Determining the voter potentials of the parties is a tricky venture. In order to do so, LUTZ uses an inventive survey instrument on electoral utilities, namely the ‘probability to vote’ questions, which directly ask survey respondents to estimate the probability that they will ever vote for a respective party (see Tillie 1995). LUTZ explores the party potential of the five major parties, concluding that the success of the SVP is at least partly due to its – compared to the other parties – excellent capacity to mobilise its voter potential.
Gender gap

Since the 1980s, women in most European and North American countries have tended to participate in elections as much as men. However, this is not the case in Switzerland, where we continue to find a gender gap in electoral participation. The 2003 federal elections were no exception in this respect, since 53% of men but only 40% of women voted.

ENGELI, GIUGNI and BALLMER-CAO argue that the commonly given explanation for the different participation rates of men and women, that is women’s belated access to suffrage in Switzerland, is not sufficient. In their contribution, the authors build on three classic explanations for the gender gap in political participation (resources, political motivations and attitudes, as well as social capital and integration), and postulate two types of effects on electoral participation, namely compositional and conditional. Compositional effects are related to the over-representation of women in the category of individuals who participate little in politics. Conditional effects, for their part, come from the fact that a factor has a differentiated effect depending on gender. Relying on data from the SELECTS 2003 post-election survey, ENGELI, GIUGNI and BALLMER-CAO highlight the importance of political attitudes and motivations for the gender gap. Their results show, firstly, significant compositional effects related to political interest. Women are less politically interested than men, and therefore turn out less. Furthermore, there are conditional effects at work. Not being engaged in politics has a greater penalizing effect on women than on men. In sum, ENGELI, GIUGNI and BALLMER-CAO’s study underscores the need for treating gender as more than a mere control variable in electoral studies, and for analysing the complex effects it can exert in interaction with other variables.

Last but not least, FONTANA, SIDLER and HARDMEIER focus on the gender gap in voters’ support for the SVP. Interestingly, this time, Switzerland presents voting patterns similar to the ones recorded in other countries. Many previous studies in different countries have reported that male voters have higher propensities to vote for parties of the so-called New Right than female voters. As FONTANA and her colleagues demonstrate, the same applies for the SVP. While the evidence is thus relatively unambiguous, disagreement emerges on its explanation. Like the authors of the previous article, FONTANA, SIDLER and HARDMEIER distinguish between compositional and conditional effects. Contrary to theoretical expectations, they find hardly any compositional effects, i.e. men and women in Switzerland do not differ in their leaning towards the SVP due to their distinct socio-economic and socio-structural profiles. Instead, social explanations of the success of parties of the New Right, as they pertain to the SVP, seem to be exclusively at work in male voters.
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