

Switzerland's 'green tsunami' slows to a trickle



Green parties were the main winners from the 2019 Swiss federal elections held on 20 October. However, as [Clive H. Church](#) writes, developments since the vote have illustrated the extent to which Swiss politics remains resistant to change. While the election generated some momentum behind efforts to strengthen the country's climate policies, it remains unclear how far the process of 'greening' Swiss politics might go.

The results of Switzerland's 20 October election were, for once, quite meaningful, even if they passed largely ignored in Britain. However, [as discussed at the time](#), they did not decide everything then and there. They left open the completion of the elections to the Council of States, or upper house, the question of the re-election of the seven strong collegial government and the evolution of green policies.

Answering these queries, in turn depends on how the party balance in the National Council, or lower house, works out. In all these fields the green tsunami, in fact, rather found itself absorbed by the dunes and dykes of the consensual Swiss political system. So, even two months after the election, a surprising uncertainty remains about how far, and in what direction, the greening of Switzerland will actually lead.

The second round

The element of surprise continued throughout November as the second round of elections for the upper house were held on successive Sundays in thirteen cantons where candidates had not got over the quota. In seven of these, both seats were at issue. The outcome of this second round was that the Christian Democrats (CVP), traditionally the largest party in the Council of States, maintained their existing strength. Thus, they kept the two seats in the Valais which had historically been theirs and beat off a promising Radical (FDP) challenge.

However, one victor, Marianne Maret, was the first ever female Senator for the canton. More surprising was the fact that the party seized a seat in Schwyz from the SVP. This helped to offset the surprising loss in Fribourg where the 31-year-old Radical Johanna Gapany ousted the sitting CVP MP by 158 votes in 60,000 thanks to a very vigorous campaign. She is the youngest MP since 1945. A defeat in Ticino also left the CVP needing to replace a heavyweight in Filippo Lombardi, previously their group leader.

Tradition was also restored by the Radicals coming from third place to snatch a seat in Vaud from the controversial socialist Ada Marra, the margin being over 5,000 votes. They also easily held the second seat in Zurich where the abrasive journalist and ideologue Roger Köppel, who had been the People's Party (SVP) candidate, had decided there was no point in letting his name go forward to the second round. The FDP also easily held seats in Zug, Berne and Aargau alongside the SVP, but came last in Ticino. There the SVP rather remarkably won a seat thanks to the Lega not standing and the Radicals doing badly as they did in Berne.

It was also in Ticino that the Social Democrats (SPS) had one of their few successes with Marina Carobbio causing a real upset by beating the sitting CVP heavyweight MP Filippo Lombardi by 45 votes. No recount was allowed. The party also won seats in St Gallen and Fribourg, where party leader Christian Levrat, topped the poll, Geneva and Solothurn. However, it suffered a bad defeat in Vaud. As to the ecologists, the Green Liberals (GLP) had no candidates in the second round, so finished up with no representatives in the upper house. Conversely, the Greens (GPS) did very well, adding three seats in Vaud, Ticino and Geneva, all being won by women. This continued the trend set on 20 October, although party leader Regula Rytz failed to win a seat in Berne.



Regula Rytz, Credit: [Hadi \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#)

Overall, the Christian Democrats with 13 and the Radicals with 12 (one fewer than in 2015) maintained their traditional majority. The Social Democrats were one seat down at nine, losing three to the Greens. The latter were up by 4 to 5, while the SVP was also up one at six. They could also rely on the support of Thomas Minder, an independent sitting for Schaffhausen. All this means that, even if the GPS had done well, the chamber still has a very different complexion from the other house, being less polarised and also more centre-right.

Despite the GPS' gains, the make-up of the Council remained very different from that of its partner chamber. This could make it harder to push through some controversial bills. In any case, the second round helped to produce a parliament which was younger, more female (especially in the Suisse Romande) and newer. In fact, half the lower house seats had new incumbents. Moreover, the new parliament was more educated, more middle class and more professional than it had been in the past.

The new parliament

Finishing the second round was not quite the end of the story. There was the question of where the MPs sat and with whom they worked. This is because Switzerland differs from the British parliament in awarding a special status to any grouping of at least five members. Recognised group status provides speaking rights, membership of committees and financial aid. Not having group status makes it very hard for individual MPs to function effectively, which is why so many join larger parties, even if they may differ from them on some issues. So, the make-up of groups could have a political impact.

The key question here was what would happen to the Conservative Democratic party, whose losses drove it down below the threshold. In the end, after much speculation, the three remaining MPs joined the Evangelicals in sitting with the Christian Democrats to form a self-proclaimed 'Middle' Group, some 40 strong. This has set out to be a decisive voice, ready to arbitrate if the new parliament finds itself divided between left and right. The centre ground is strengthened by the GLP, which sits as single group, one of the few without any members of the Council of States.

The largest group remains that of the SVP, which is strengthened by the presence of MPs from the Lega and the EDU/UDF, along with independent senator Thomas Minder. The Radicals form a group of their own, symbolising their own more moderate stances. At the other extreme, both the leftist MPs have chosen to join the Green group rather than that of the SPS. This is symptomatic both of the left-leaning nature of the GPS and the weakened status of the Social Democrats.

All of this suggests that Swiss politics will remain largely a tripolar affair. On the far-right, the People's Party seems set on maintaining its traditional lines, claiming that the country needs a strong SVP more than ever. Hence it stresses its opposition to taxation, the expansion of the civil service and the payment of cohesion funds to the EU. Since it blames the latter on the FDP and the CVP and its key points make no mention of climate and the environment, its potential for finding allies is limited. It seems already to have given up on getting any of its bills through what Regula Rytz has declared to be a centre-left parliament, forcing it to rely on direct democracy to advance or defend its ideas. And the FDP is unlikely to offer it full support since it is seeking to develop its own climate policy to protect itself against the appeal of the Green Liberals, leaving it uneasily perched between the right and the centre.

At the other extremity, the two left wing parties, the SPS and the GPS fall equally short of a majority. Moreover, the former is uncertain about its future direction given the announcement of the retirement of its leader for the last twelve years, Christian Levrat, in the spring. And it must be a little uneasy at finding itself almost the junior partner of the GPS. Nonetheless, it took the lead in pushing the latter's claim to a seat in government and welcoming the openings given by the progressive nature of the new parliament.

This does make it seem as if more centrist forces may have the deciding voice, especially if the Radicals and Green Liberals align with them. This means, on the one hand, the Green Liberals cannot be relied on to support the GPS, thus weakening the left pole and the impact of the green wave. This became very clear when it came to the GPS claim for a government seat. Although, or perhaps because, the GLP emerged from a secession from the GPS in 2004 it differs increasingly on socio-economic matters and on the specifics of environmental policy. It is also the most clearly pro-European party nowadays, after the SPS developed cold feet over threats to wage protection under a framework agreement. However, the new 'Middle' group is unproven and has its own internal divisions including inside the CVP.

So, while potentially, tripolarism has become more marked with the elections, it is not yet a fixed and clear-cut thing, which can be safely and reliably predicted. It is a flexible and changing affair. Already it has failed to prevent the Greens siding with the SVP in their opposition to the counter-project to the ban on the wearing of the burqa. So, tripolarism seems likely to be a general structural trend and not an absolute predictor of political alignments. Swiss party politics will remain fluid and pluralistic, differing in specific policy areas and at different times.

Governmental change

Although there had been limited discussion of governmental change before the election, especially after the Zurich cantonal elections in March, the succeeding six months saw relatively little mention of the topic. Come the autumn, however, the scale of the gains made by the two ecological parties prompted the GPS to seek to overturn the governmental status quo. This started on the night of the election when Regula Rytz floated the idea that, because the two green parties had together won 21% of the vote on 20 October, there should be a green member of the Federal Council, perhaps representing the two parties jointly.

And, increasingly, the suggestion was that the seat to be taken over was that of Ignazio Cassis, the Italian speaking FDP Foreign Minister who had been in office since the autumn of 2017. He was chosen mainly because the FDP's share of the vote was no longer high enough to justify them having two seats. It was also partly because he was much criticised and especially because there was a reluctance amongst the strongly female leadership of the GPS to dispossess the recently elected FDP Justice Minister Karin Keller-Sutter on grounds of her gender.

Although public opinion showed no enthusiasm for this, the idea took root in November. It ceased to be a matter of a joint nomination and more a matter of securing a seat for Regula Rytz the GPS leader. The argument for a single candidate, as opposed to a choice, which was usually the case (and which is favoured by the Green Liberals and others), was that these are exceptional times when there is no formal vacancy. Having a single candidate would make things simpler. It would also help to focus attention on the principle of the demand.

This encouraged much thinking about the way governments are formed. Some political analysts believe 20 October was so fundamental a shift that the old '[Magic Formula](#)' is over and has to be revised. Rytz herself suggested there should be two each for the SVP and SPS and one each for the 'medium sized parties', the FDP, GPS and CVP. This should be a new fixed formula. Interestingly, it relegates GL to the status of a small party. The change would, in her view, shift the balance from centre-right to centre-left. The CVP leader also proposed that there should be a governance conference before the election to establish a new, agreed, pattern for government formation.

Things went slowly because there were many arguments against a change. To begin with, there was no vacancy and, after the unhappy experiment in which Christoph Blocher ousted Ruth Metzler, there was a reluctance to dispossess a sitting minister who had done nothing to deserve ejection. This was especially the case given that, in the past, parties had had to wait for some time before their electoral strength was rewarded by a seat in government. It was not an automatic change. This had happened to the SVP in 1999. And the argument was often put that the Greens needed to demonstrate that their success was not a flash in the pan but a clear trend by winning next time around.

Moreover, to make government formation automatically dependent on electoral change would destabilise the government and deny it the above party stability which it has traditionally, and profitably, enjoyed. The other parties also liked to suggest that times were so difficult that they should not be changing ministers. Continuity and experience were at a premium in other words. There was also general concern about the harm that could be done to federalism by kicking an Italian speaker out after only two years, even though the minority had been out of government for 20 years.

As 11 December drew nearer it became clear that the CVP, FDP and the SVP would not support the demand, refusing to allow the GPS leader the normal hearing by their group. However, the latter also tried to fish in troubled waters by seeking to target social democratic Ministers. The Green Liberals gave Rytz a hearing but, because they were divided, gave their MPs a free vote. Interestingly, they, like many others, found her too left wing. The SPS which was hesitant at first also heard her and then went on to push her case strongly. One of their arguments was that unless a Green was elected, the government would represent a lower percentage of the electorate than it ever had. Choosing Rytz would see 80% of voters represented in government. The Greens themselves did not protest too much, giving some the impression that it was really only laying down a marker for the future.

In the event, although the SPS and the GPS pushed the case on democratic grounds, the other parties refused to dispossess the existing ministers, preferring to preserve both stability and their own powers. As a result, all of the government were returned, five with scores of around 200 of the 244 then available votes. The lowest score was that of Cassis with 146, reflecting the left's attempt to push Rytz in. As she only received 82 votes there were accusations of betrayal by the GLP and perhaps even by some Social Democrats. The Greens then resolved to keep pressing the Federal Council to become greener while still nursing their claim for a future occasion.

A green tsunami?

The decision to concentrate on campaigning for increased environmental change was perhaps also a reflection of the fact that, despite the talk of the environment being the decisive factor for electors and triggering a green tsunami, there had been no immediate breakthrough in environmental policy. Indeed, there has yet to be either a Swiss equivalent of the Channel 4 debate with its melting ice sculptures of Johnson and Farage or a Green Deal like that of the EU. Indeed, Switzerland fell five places to 16th in the Global Climate Performance Audit.

This was even though Regula Rytz had early on called for a national debate, leading Social Democrat Adeline Thorens had called for the country to go carbon free by 2030 (twenty years earlier than the government target) and the Green Liberals were demanding ambitious measures. Even the issuing of the UN report warning that the world was already falling behind its targets did not make that much of an impact. Nonetheless, 112,000 people signed up to the [Save the Glaciers initiative](#) in a mere five months. This calls for the phasing out of fossil fuels and other carbon emitting processes within a decade.

In fact, things moved at their stately pace through the political system. Activists continued to seek allies while Extinction Rebellion continued to agitate. Equally, some cantons and communes made moves of their own while parliament postponed discussion of the crucial CO2 law until the spring. This was ostensibly done so that the new, greener, chambers could deal with it. The government nominated a leading green to represent it in the Madrid COPA talks in December and the incoming President, the Social democrat Simonetta [Sommaruga](#), has made it clear that the environment will have to be a priority in 2020, notably where agriculture and electricity are concerned. Nonetheless, the country is still awaiting positive action in line with the green wave.

Similarly, there was little movement on women's rights despite the on-going electoral success of female candidates. The talk was of the necessity of finding a woman to replace Christian Levrat as leader of the Social Democrats. More concrete measures were expected to be tabled but, so far, they have not emerged. Meanwhile, there has been increasing concern about rising levels of domestic violence against women in Switzerland.

Swiss-EU relations

On the European issue, which had largely been ignored during the election campaign, there was a similar lack of movement, despite the fact that the Green Liberal successes brought in more stronger supporters of close relations with the EU. Moreover, there was no domestic thought about how the changed balance might affects things. However, the election was welcomed by the Green bloc in the European Parliament who urged the new Commission to be more flexible towards Switzerland. Then, when the two relevant parliamentary delegations met, they agreed that opportunities had been missed and called for a consensual approach so that the framework agreement could be ratified. However, the incoming Commission under Ursula von der Leyen made no attempt to meet Swiss Ministers or to provide the clarification requested in the spring. And the Swiss dossier remained in the same unsympathetic hands in Brussels.

Perhaps because of this, Michael Ambühl and an academic colleague came forward with the idea of a transitional agreement which might prevent the impasse from spiralling out of control. They urged the Swiss to pay more into the EU and to hold off from seeking new accords. Negotiations on the full framework could come later, perhaps once the new Limited Migration initiative was out of the way in late May. The Tory election victory in England has also raised new hopes that things may ease and the EU might become more flexible.

Meanwhile, the new parliament has given the impression that, while it wants better relations with the EU, it has little intention of altering the Swiss position. Hence it has only agreed to pay over a second tranche of cohesion funds if there is no further discrimination against Switzerland. This has irritated Brussels which feels that the country has had full access to the Single Market since 2012 without making any payment. Hence, the impasse continues and here, as elsewhere, normal Swiss politics have rolled on despite the green wave.

A slow road to greening

Overall the impression is that the election victory has yet to make an impact commensurate with the scale of the greens' electoral success. This is partly because the greens are more divided than some assumed. It is also because the normal processes of Swiss parliamentary politics run deep. So, when things do move, they will flow through the normal channels of consensual politics. Limited legislative proceedings, consultations and votes will mark Swiss progress. There is unlikely to be any dramatic immediate shifts such as can happen in a majoritarian system like Britain's.

However, now that the Greens have failed to get into government, there is a slight question of how they will react to their defeat. Will they keep plugging along, hoping to persuade parliament and increasing their popular support, or will they retreat into an oppositional sulk as the SVP did after a governmental defeat in 2007? Their initial response suggests that they will keep at it. And the consensual and pluralistic nature of Swiss politics makes this by far the wisest course.

What will happen to the green wave depends largely on three domestic factors, beginning with whether the re-elected government actually comes up with convincing policies. Secondly, it depends on how the new parliament works and whether the other parties will back the kind of legislation wished for by the GPS or continue more cautiously. Thirdly, it will also depend on whether the swing away from populism continues and embraces the kind of sacrifices which more climate change related policies will undoubtedly demand.

In other words, the tsunami will have to flow a long way before it can really reshape Swiss politics and policy. Normal channels have kept Switzerland afloat for years and have held back the worst of the populist surge. So, they could no doubt do the same with the climate emergency. In the long run then, it looks as if the October election victory will be a major impetus for change, but it is unlikely in itself to green Switzerland.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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