

The Centre strengthened as majority procurer

Georg Lutz, Redaktion DeFacto
30th October 2023



On October 22nd, 2023, elections were held in Switzerland. The votes have been counted and the results are known. Georg Lutz assesses the election results, takes a look of whether the outcome was as predicted, and what consequences can be expected from the election results.

Interview series
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What do you think is the most remarkable thing about the 2023 election outcome?

Georg Lutz: The trends that emerged were confirmed: the SVP wins, the Green parties lose significantly, the SP gains, but not as much as the Greens lost, i.e. overall there is a small shift to the right. What was remarkable, however, was actually the small fluctuations seen with the FDP and the Centre. The FDP's albeit minor losses still represent a loss of voter share

in 10 of the last 11 national elections since 1983. Compared to the Centre, the FDP now only has a slightly larger vote share, but fewer seats in the National Council and probably fewer mandates in the Council of States after the second rounds of elections. The CVP, on the other hand, has managed the name change and the merger with the BDP well to become the "Centre". Thanks to the merger and the deletion of the "Christian" in the name, the Centre was able to lay the basis for maintaining and even increasing its voter share in all cantons, i.e. even where the CVP was very weak before the merger with the BDP. This is beneficial from the party's perspective, as it allows them to compete everywhere in Switzerland with both the FDP and the GLP.

Are you surprised that the SVP made such strong gains?

No, the polls before the elections were confirmed. It is remarkable how the SVP managed to repeat its 2015 result. Migration was an important issue for the people of Switzerland, but not as dominant as in 2015. Other issues were at least as important where the party does not actually score points, such as health costs or the environment and climate. And the party today has fewer prominent figureheads as was the case with Toni Brunner or Ueli Maurer; instead, attention is spread across many shoulders and is thus more diffuse. It is still speculative why this was possible, as good polling data is still lacking: apart from the cyclical nature of the issues, there may be mobilisation effects, and it is also possible that the party was able to profit even more from its protest stance in various areas.

What consequences can be expected from the fact that the Centre is roughly as strong as the FDP?

There will certainly be a discussion about the composition of the Federal Council, at the latest when a FDP Federal Councillor resigns. The FDP's legitimacy to two seats has further eroded, as it was already clearly overrepresented in the Federal Council before these elections. If the left is prepared to support the Centre, the SVP and FDP cannot maintain their majority in the Federal Council. In other words, the FDP must hope that Ignazio Cassis can hold out for another four years and that he will then regain his share of the electorate. The fact that incumbent Federal Councillors should not be voted out of office remains the only argument for two FDP seats at the moment. And it is not only because of the Federal Council that the competitive situation between the FDP and the Centre is intensified; the Centre can now exert pressure on the FDP in all cantons.

How will the election result affect the coming legislature?

Overall, the majorities in the National Council and the Council of States have not fundamentally changed. In both chambers, majorities exist only with the Centre, with either the left or the right, depending on the case. The Centre is thus still in a very comfortable position as a majority procurer.

Nevertheless, it will not be easier to find viable and stable compromises for central challenges, for example in health, climate and energy policy or in clarifying the relationship with Europe. The SVP has once again done well with a strategic opposition course and the competitive situation between the FDP and the Centre will intensify. This means that the FDP and the Centre could also take up strategic positions in opposition to the other party in the political centre.

Georg Lutz

Georg Lutz studied and obtained his doctorate at the Universities of Bern and Geneva. Currently, he is the director of the Swiss Competence Centre for Social Sciences FORS and professor of political science at the University of Lausanne. His research focuses on political behavioural research (especially electoral research and voting behaviour), but also political institutions with a focus on Swiss politics.

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