Introduction to the Special Issue "The 2015 Swiss National Elections"

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Abstract

This special issue brings together a large variety of contributions dealing with party choice, political attitudes and the dynamics of electoral campaigns in Switzerland. The introduction places the contributions in the broader framework of current debates in the international literature and highlights substantial and methodological innovations of the articles. The articles in this volume address central issues of the literature dealing with the two-dimensional structure of political competition, take up key questions of the dynamics of election campaigns, and finally echo a large interest for the topic of populism, not only on the side of the parties but also on the side of the voters. The introduction also underlines the new and innovative ways in which the articles link the different datasets together in order to address substantial questions on the complexity of the environment in which voters form their choice and political parties operate during an election campaign.

Introduction

This special issue "The 2015 Swiss National Elections" offers new and innovative perspectives on the study of voting and elections in Switzerland. Despite a rather long history of electoral research in Switzerland, the present volume offers nine refreshing and inspiring contributions to electoral research. The articles perfectly illustrate an international trend in election studies that consists in collecting and analysing data not only on the voters' side but also on the candidates, the media and the election campaign. The special issues on the 2011 and 2007 elections published in the Swiss Political Science Review (Lachat et al. 2014; Lutz et al. 2010) were already well engaged in this trend. However, we believe the present volume to be particularly advanced in the way the different datasets are linked to each other. This reflects also the increasing data collection efforts undertaken by the Swiss Election Study (Selects), combined with the opportunity to use specific questions developed by researchers via a call for modules.

The contributions assembled here approach the 2015 Swiss elections from a large variety of angles. They emphasize different factors to be relevant for the opinion formation process and the electoral outcome. Some contributions underline the importance of short-term dynamics and especially the role

of the electoral campaign. Others insist on more long-term factors such as the entrenched policy positions and ideologies of political parties or the psychology of the voters. Other contributions draw our attention to the role of other actors such as the media or the interest groups in providing resources to candidates. While this plurality of entry points may trouble the reader at first glance, we believe that the contributions shed light on different but complementary elements of the opinion formation process and the various mechanisms linking preferences to political behaviour. (Swiss) electoral research in the future will certainly have to think more forcefully on the relationship between these different types of explanations and how some of them could be combined in a more efficient way. For the time being, this plurality of approaches illustrates the vivacity of electoral research, especially in a small country like Switzerland.

In this introduction, we first present the main features of the 2015 national elections[2] before highlighting the substantive and methodological innovations of the contributions assembled in this volume.

A Shift to the Right as Principal Outcome of the 2015 Elections in Switzerland

The Swiss national elections of 2015 have been marked by a shift to the right of the National Council. With 29.4% of the vote share, the SVP has been the big winner of the 2015 elections (see Table 1). The score obtained by the SVP is of importance in the Swiss multi-party system characterized by a high degree of fragmentation. It is the first time in the history of Swiss politics since the introduction of proportional representation in 1919 that a party reaches more than 29% of the votes. Until now, scores above 28% of the votes were only reached a few times, by the Radical Democratic Party just after the passage to proportional representation[3], by the Social Democratic Party (SPS) in the 1930s and 1940s, and finally already by the SVP in 2007 (28.9%). In the 2015 elections, the SVP could definitively recover from the split of the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) that occurred in 2008 in the aftermath of the non-(re)election of Christoph Blocher to the Federal Council in 2007. While the SVP had lost 2.3 percentage points between 2007 and 2011, it benefited from a 2.8 percentage points increase between 2011 and 2015.

Next to the SVP, the Liberal-Radicals (FDP[4]) were also important winners of this election and contributed to this right-wing shift in the National Council. It is the first election since 1979 where the FDP managed to stop the continuous decline in their vote share. The increase in the vote share of the two parties located on the right of the political spectrum in Switzerland was also reflected in a shift to the right in the number of seats. It is the first time in recent history that the FDP (33 seats) and the SVP (65 + 3) – two members of the League of the People of Ticino (Lega) and one from the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG) belong to the SVP parliamentary group – enjoy a majority of seats in the National Council (101 seats on 200 seats). In the 2007 and 2003 elections, they reached a total of 99 seats, and only 87 seats in the 2011 elections[5].

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[2] Other accounts describing the results of the 2015 elections include Bernhard (2016), Bochsler et al. (2016), Lutz (2016) or Widmer (2016). The Swiss Political Science Review published in 2016 a symposium on the 2015 national elections (Müller et al. 2016).

[3] The Radical Democratic Party reached 28.8% of the votes in 1919, 28.3% in 1922, while the Social Democratic Party reached 28.7% of the votes in 1931, 28.0% in 1935, 28.6% in 1943.

[4] The full name is "FDP.The Liberals", which reflects the merge that occurred in 2009 between the Radical Democratic Party and the Liberal Party.

[5] The detail by party is the following: 2011 elections: FDP 30 seats, SVP 54 seats, Lega 2 seats, MCG 1 seat; 2007 elections: FDP 31, Liberal Party 4, SVP 62, Lega 1, Federal Democratic Union 1; 2003: FDP 36, Liberal Party 4, SVP 55, Lega 1, Swiss Democrats 1, Federal Democratic Union 2.

Table 1: Vote Shares of the Main Parties in the National Council from 2007 to 2015 (in %)

	2007	2011	**2015**	*Diff 2007-11*	*Diff 2011-15*
SVP	28.9	26.6	**29.4**	*-2.3*	*2.8*
SPS	19.5	18.7	**18.8**	*-0.8*	*0.1*
FDP	17.6	15.1	**16.4**	*-2.5*	*1.3*
CVP	14.5	12.3	**11.6**	*-2.2*	*-0.7*
GPS	9.6	8.4	**7.1**	*-1.2*	*-1.4*
BDP		5.4	**4.1**	*5.4*	*-1.3*
GLP	1.4	5.4	**4.6**	*4.0*	*-0.8*
Others	8.5	8.1	**7.9**	*-0.4*	*-0.1*

Note: The FDP includes the Liberal Party in 2007. Source: Federal Statistical Office

The parties located in the centre of the political system have been the main losers of the 2015 elections. The BDP obtained only 4.1% of the votes after having received a notable 5.4% of the votes for its first participation in 2011. The Green Liberal Party (GLP) reached 4.6% of the votes, against 5.4% four years before. The relatively bad election results for these two parties in 2015 have put into question their capacity to survive as sizeable parties in the medium term. The erosion of the "new" centre was reinforced by the continuous decline of the Christian Democrat People's Party (CVP), which could not stop its long-term decline contrarily to the FDP.

On the left, the SPS managed to stabilize its vote share at 18.8% (+0.1 percentage points) after a continuous decline since 2003. However, the left overall also lost vote shares, since the Greens only reached 7.1% of the votes (-1.4 percentage points). This represented their second defeat in a row after having reached a historical peak of 9.6% of the votes in 2007. Overall, the left has 55 seats (SPS 43 seats, Greens 11, Workers' Party 1) in the National Council, while the centre parties altogether have 44 seats (CVP 28 seats[6], Evangelical People's Party 2, BDP 7, GLP 7).

The 2015 elections show a very different trend from the ones held in 2011. The 2011 elections put an end to the SVP's continuous electoral progression since 1987. The rise of a "new" centre in 2011, and especially the breakthrough of the BDP, was seen as a break to the polarization of Swiss politics. Lachat et al. (2014: 515) noted that the 2011 elections mark "an end of the trend towards a growing level of party polarization". With the weakening of the old and new centre parties, the 2015 elections saw a return of polarization between a stable left and a reinforced political right.

The important shift to the right in the National Council has not reached a similar level in the Council of States. Quite the contrary, the change in the National Council is balanced by a trend of continuity in the Council of States. Despite the strategic goal of the SVP to gain additional seats in the Council of States, it did not manage to increase its representation in this chamber (see Table 2). As shown repeatedly for the elections of cantonal governments, the SVP still has difficulties to succeed under majoritarian electoral rules (Lachat 2006; Sciarini 2011: 111-116). In contrast, the SPS was able – thanks to a growing political disunity of the centre and right parties (Bochsler and Bousbah 2015) – to reinforce its representation in cantonal executives in the last decades (Nicolet and Sciarini 2010: 441-442; Sciarini 2011: 122-125), and it also reached its highest level of seats ever in the Council of States.

Table 2: Number of Seats in the Council of States from 2007 to 2015

	2007	2011	**2015**	*Diff 2007-11*	*Diff 2011-15*

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[6] We count the 27 CVP mandates and the representative from the Social Christians of Obwalden who belongs to the CVP parliamentary group.

SVP	7	5	**5**	*-2*	*0*
SPS	9	11	**12**	*+2*	*+1*
FDP	12	11	**13**	*-1*	*+2*
CVP	15	13	**13**	*-2*	*0*
GPS	2	2	**1**	*0*	*-1*
BDP	0	1	**1**	*+1*	*0*
GLP	1	2	**0**	*+1*	*-2*
Others	0	1	**1**	*+1*	*0*

Source: Federal Statistical Office

For observers of Swiss politics, it appears as an important paradox that the Council of States, once known as a bastion of conservative forces, has now a more centrist profile than the National Council. If one adds the seats from the FDP and the SVP (with the independent Thomas Minder who is member of the SVP parliamentary group), these parties hold only 19 out of 46 seats and are therefore far away from their majority of seats in the National Council.

Some experts see therefore the two chambers of the Swiss parliament as composed of different political majorities (a FDP and SVP majority in the National Council vs. a CVP and left parties majority in the Council of States) leading to potential conflicts in the legislative decision-making process (e.g., Müller et al. 2016). A systematic assessment of voting divergences between the two chambers will be needed to definitively answer this question. While this Special Issue does not directly engage with this topic, it is useful for the time being to remind three elements of the Swiss political system. First, voting coalitions between parties in the Swiss parliament are not fixed but vary (increasingly) according to the policy areas (Traber 2015), reflecting "a new and more relaxed form of consensus at varying geometry" of the Swiss decision-making process (Sciarini 2015: 253-254). Second, the left-right conflict remains also salient in the Swiss parliament (Traber 2015), and in this voting configuration, the left remains in a minority status in both chambers (55 seats on 200 in the National Council, 13 seats on 46 in the Council of States). Third, it is difficult to read the simple sum-up of seats from the left and the CVP in the Council of States as forming a coherent "centre-left" majority. The relatively strong representation (in the past but also in the present) of the CVP in the Upper House is due to its dominance in conservative cantons, where ideological differences with the left are far from marginal.

Finally, an important feature of the 2015 elections is the fact that the electoral campaign took place in the middle of a "refugee crisis" in Europe. When asked about the most important problem facing Switzerland, migration scored as the first problem for 44% of the citizens, far ahead of other problems, and twice the score reached in 2011 (Lutz 2016: 32). The importance of the migration issue and its consequences for the electoral outcome constitute a common theme of many contributions to this volume.

Thematic Contributions of this Special Issue to the Study of Elections

The contributions in this Special Issue shed light on these developments in the 2015 Swiss National Elections from a variety of angles. Thematically, they echo and contribute to three topics that have a central position in the international literature. A first important topic in the international literature deals with the *emergence of a second, cultural dimension of the political space*. This dimension is particularly salient and polarized in Switzerland (e.g., Bochsler et al. 2015; Kriesi 2015; Kriesi et al. 2008). It is therefore difficult to understand past and present dynamics in Swiss politics if one sticks to the view that politics is structured along a left-right economic dimension only – even though the two dimensions are correlated to some extent. Thus, the Swiss case is of particular interest to advance our knowledge on the policy trade-offs both voters and parties face in a two-dimensional political

competition. The articles presented in this volume depart from the classic view that the political space is organized along a single left-right dimension. Although all contributions acknowledge the existence of a multidimensional space, two of them more explicitly build on this idea. **Anna-Sophie Kurella and Jan Rosset (2018)** focus on the voting behaviour of one group of voters: those who are located on the left on the economic dimension but at the same time have conservative attitudes on the cultural dimension. Since there is no party holding such a position, voters might have particular difficulties to choose a party in accordance with their preferences. Kurella and Rosset find indeed that voters having this combination of preferences are more likely to abstain. When they decide to vote, they disproportionately support right-wing parties who represent their views on the cultural dimension which serves also as explanation for their success in 2015. **Patrick Emmenegger, Silja Häusermann and Stefanie Walter (2018)** engage also with the idea of cross-pressured voters, but at the level of more specific policies. Studying the example of the complex relationship between Switzerland's migration and European policy and the potential trade-offs citizens face, the authors focus on two specific groups of voters for whom the choice between the economic benefits of EU integration versus sovereign immigration control is not clear, either because they are potentially cross-pressured (opposing immigration, while favouring Swiss-EU bilateral treaties) or because they have no clear preferences on one of these dimensions (the "neutrals"). Their analysis shows that the group of "potentially cross-pressured" voters is located almost exclusively on the right side of the political spectrum, among voters of the FDP and especially among high-income voters of the SVP, and is also well-informed and politically active. When asked to make a choice between keeping the bilateral agreement and limiting immigration, cross-pressured SVP voters display a strong and unilateral tendency to opt against the bilateral treaties.

The second ongoing topic in the international literature addressed in this Special Issue relates to the *role of short-term factors and campaign dynamics*. Against the background of withering ties between political parties and their voters—as reflected in declining party identification and membership rates and increasing electoral volatility (e.g., Dalton and Wattenberg 2000)—scholars have dedicated more attention to the impact of short-term determinants of the vote, such as parties' issue-ownership, campaign ads and media coverage. Whereas Switzerland has long been characterized by high stability on the aggregate level, volatility is also important on the level of individual voters. This is demonstrated in several contributions. Drawing on the literature on issue ownership **Adrien Petitpas and Pascal Sciarini (2018)** focus on how the short-term instability of voters' evaluations of parties' issue-handling competence affects the stability of their party choice during an electoral campaign. Their analysis demonstrates that changes in party choice are therefore shaped by the dynamics related to issue competence. **Guillaume Zumofen and Marlène Gerber (2018)** deal also with the (in-)stability of vote intentions, but concentrate on the effects of the individual exposure to parties' political campaigns. Focusing on the two winning parties of the 2015 elections, the FDP and the SVP, and the intensity of their advertising campaign, they find that individuals who have been exposed to an intensive political campaign from the SVP see their initial vote intention for the SVP reinforced. However, no such effect was found for the FDP. Parties' advertisements on specific issues (migration, relations to the EU, economy) have only limited effects, however. Instead of analysing vote choice, **Bruno Wüest (2018)** invites the reader to take one step back and to think more carefully about individual perceptions of political problems. He analyses the process by which voters develop complex perceptions of political problems against the background of the rise of issue- and candidate-based voting. Working with the open-ended answers to the most important problem question in the voter survey, Wüest shows which issues and sub-issues Swiss voters considered important in the 2015 election, and highlights the influence of individual and contextual factors. While most articles focus mainly on the role of parties and their linkages to voters, the contribution by **Riccardo Primavesi, Georg Lutz and André Mach**

(2018) draws our attention to interest groups and their influence during electoral campaigns. The authors analyse the support of interest groups to individual candidates and assess the impact of this support on the electoral success of these candidates. Focusing on the electoral success of non-incumbent candidates, they find that holding leading positions within an organisation and receiving public endorsements from an organisation increase significantly the chances of being elected. However, they do not find any effect of financial contributions from interest groups on candidates' success. In the absence of any legislation on campaigns' funding in Switzerland, the authors underline the potential weakness of their data based on candidates' self-reports and invite to further research on the matter.

Last but not least, *populism* is another topic that has attracted over the recent years considerable attention in the international literature. It is not often the case that small countries set the trend for worldwide phenomena. When it comes to right-wing populism, Switzerland is clearly at the "avant-garde". The Schwarzenbach initiatives in the early 1970s were among the first important anti-immigrant mobilisations in post-war Europe (Skenderovic 2009). The successful ideological and organizational transformation of the SVP has inspired several other parties in Europe. Even personalities of the far right such as the influent Steve Bannon recognizes the SVP, and its' spiritual leader Christoph Blocher in particular, as being a model for their movements[7]. Switzerland is therefore a particularly interesting case to study long- and short-term developments in populism (see also Bornschier 2017). A recent interest in the literature on populism (see Akkermann et al. 2014) is to study the distribution of populist attitudes among the voters (demand-side) in order to complement the focus on the ideology and strategy of parties (supply-side). Thanks to a unique battery of questions on populist attitudes available in the 2015 Swiss election study, **Laurent Bernhard and Regula Hänggli (2018)** are able to engage with this literature and analyse the distribution of populist attitudes among citizens. The authors show that people leaning towards the right are more likely to hold populist attitudes. By contrast, people leaning to the left do not display a high level of support for populist views. It is therefore not the fact of being located at the extremes of the ideological spectrum (being right or left) that determines the support for populist attitudes. This constitutes an important difference to other studies that have found populist attitudes to be located also on the left side of the political spectrum, particularly in Southern Europe. **Anna Storz and Julian Bernauer (2018)** analyse in their contribution the variation of populist discourse among the cantonal branches of the SVP. Using a quantitative text analysis of the SVP cantonal manifestos, they estimate the degree of populism of the SVP in the different cantons. They find an important variety, and link this "contextual populism" to the individual level. However, they do not find a strong correspondence between the strength of populism as contained in the manifestos of the SVP's cantonal sections and the strength of populist attitudes among citizens in a given canton but some pattern related to the existence of the BDP's emergence. Not directly focusing on populism, but speaking to it, **Kathrin Ackermann, Eros Zampieri and Markus Freitag (2018)** analyse the psychological determinants of voting, particularly the relationship between personality traits and voting for the SVP in the 2015 Swiss national elections. They make use of the well-established Five Factor Model (or more commonly known as "Big Five") to show that personality traits matter for SVP voting. Furthermore, the authors show that the relation between personality and voting is partly mediated by attitudes, especially by attitudes towards immigration. The authors conclude that psychological characteristics of voters can complement our knowledge of the socio-

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[7] Zünd, C. (2018). "A Zurich, Steve Bannon glorifie Christoph Blocher en père des populistes.". Le Temps, 7 March 2018. Online: https://www.letemps.ch/suisse/zurich-steve-bannon-glorifie-christoph-blocher-pere-populistes [accessed: 3 October 2018].

structural and socio-economic profile of voters and emphasize the importance of psychological processes for party choice.

These various contributions to major debates in the international literature on electoral research were notably made possible by the efforts of Selects to include new specific survey questions developed by researchers via a call for modules. This bottom-up instrument provides the academic community with the opportunity to include specific questions in the questionnaire in a given election. The main advantage, as discussed by **Kritzinger (2018)** in her invited article, is to offer some space to innovative and topical research ideas in the questionnaires that otherwise emphasize continuity between elections in order to create time series that allow analyses of long-term trends and developments. Topical issues for Swiss politics could thereby be integrated into Selects. This is the case for example for the relations between Switzerland and the European Union **(see Emmenegger et al. 2018)** and citizens' perceptions of party competence on five salience issues **(see Petitpas and Sciarini 2018)**. Innovative approaches coming from political psychology could also find their way into Selects thanks to the inclusion of some questions on the personality traits of voters **(see Ackermann et al. 2018)**. Selects could also follow recent developments in the literature on populism and integrate questions on the degree to which citizens hold populist attitudes **(see Bernhard and Hänggli 2018; Storz and Bernauer 2018)**.

Methodological Innovations in the Study of Swiss Electoral Research

The fresh breath of this volume has not only been possible due to the inclusion of new survey questions allowing a better engagement with the current international literature, but also thanks to methodological innovations that many of the contributions share. First, the contributions presented in this volume fully exploit the varied collection of data that Selects offers to researchers. Over the years, the post-election study as main component has been completed by various other data, namely a candidate survey, a combined panel/rolling cross-section survey and a media analysis. By extending the data collection from voter surveys to candidates and the media, Selects has followed an international trend in electoral research. As discussed by **Kritzinger (2018)**, national election studies increasingly collect data on various actors (candidates, parties and news media). While voter surveys are still core to national election studies, they represent today only one part of data collection efforts. As emphasized by Kritzinger, this variety makes it not only possible to study diverse aspects of the campaign per se, but also offers the opportunity to link the data to each other thanks to "linkage points" implemented in the different components. This new setting allows to develop a more encompassing and fine-grained picture of the interactions between citizens, parties, elites and the media that shape the opinion formation process and, ultimately, electoral outcomes.

Several studies presented in this volume link the different datasets in an innovative way. **Wüest (2018)** links the Selects voter surveys to the media analysis to assess the influence of the information environment on voters' perceptions of the most important political problems. **Kurella and Rosset (2018)** integrate information from the candidate survey to their analysis of the post-election survey while **Petitpas and Sciarini (2018)** fully exploit the three waves of the panel survey to study the short-term changes in the way voters evaluate the competences of parties on specific issues. Other contributions link the Selects data with external data sources. To study the impact of the election campaign on vote intentions, **Zumofen and Gerber (2018)** make use of an additional dataset on political advertisements collected by the Année Politique Suisse (APS) at the University of Bern and link it to the panel/rolling cross-section survey. **Primavesi et al. (2018)** use the candidate survey to assess the relationship between candidates and interest groups and then link this information to official

electoral scores. Finally, **Storz and Bernauer (2018)** rely on their own text analysis of the Swiss People's Party's (SVP) cantonal manifestos and link them to individual vote choices and attitudes, as measured by the panel/rolling-cross section survey.

In sum, the new opportunities to link different data together reflect also substantial concerns on the complexity of the environment in which voters and parties operate. While the situation is not new at all, the rise of new social media, the heterogeneity of voters, the rapidity in which parties respond to each other, their need for allies and their access to financial resources intensify the complexity of the electoral campaign and the parties' capacity to transmit their message to the voters. The various data at disposal provide therefore unique opportunities to study these new challenges and will hopefully continue to do so in the future.

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