

NEW POLITICS IN WESTERN EUROPE

The Rise and Success
of Green Parties
and Alternative Lists

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Switzerland: The "Green" and "Alternative Parties"

Andreas Ladner

Development of Green and Alternative Parties

In the early seventies the authorities of Neuchâtel, a city in the French-speaking part of Switzerland planned a motorway along the lake right through town. A petition drive aimed at stopping the project was unsuccessful, and a referendum at this stage was impossible. Since there were no remaining possibilities for preventing the project from outside government, opponents of the motorway moved to send their representatives to the local parliament and to fight against this motorway from the inside. At the communal elections in spring of 1972 the motorway opponents gained 8 out of 41 seats in the parliament and became the third-largest party behind the Free Democratic Party (*FdP*) and the Social Democratic Party (*SPS*). The motorway project along the border of the lake was cancelled and the *Mouvement populaire pour l' environnement (MPE)*, the first green party in Switzerland, was founded. It united, among others, people from the Free Democratic and the Social Democratic Party. Another ten years passed before a green party was established on the national level.

In the mid seventies another green party appeared on the political scene. In the French-speaking canton of Vaud, affiliates of the *Ecole polytechnique fédérale* in Lausanne founded the *Groupement pour la protection de l' environnement (GPE)*. In 1979, the *GPE* was to become one of the first green parties in a western society to send a representative to a national parliament.

In 1978 a green party was established in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (*Grüne Partei des Kantons Zürich, GPZ*), to some extent with the conviction that environmental matters should not be left to extreme right- or left-wing parties.

Just prior to this, a group from the extreme right had announced that it would present a list of candidates with a green program at the national elections. On the local and cantonal levels the left-wing POCH, a party rooted in the student movement of 1968, had also been quite active in ecological matters. With the establishment of a green party at the political centre, the fragmentation of the green forces was about to begin (Geschwend 1986).

In the years preceding the national elections of 1983, concern about ecological problems increased dramatically. Green parties of many different political persuasions appeared in various Swiss cantons and gained considerable support in community and cantonal elections. With a sharp eye on the new constitution of the national parliament, the green politicians attempted to bring all these groups under a common roof and to found a green party similar to that in Germany (Rebeaud 1987). Despite efforts to minimize conflicts through exclusion of nationally organized parties from the constitutional meetings, e.g. the right-wing Alien-Party (NA), the Independent Party (LdU) and the parties on the extreme left - the Progressive Organisations of Switzerland (POCH) and the Socialist Workers Party (SAP) the task proved to be impossible.

The differences between the moderate and the radical groups appeared to be too fundamental to resolve. Purely environmental concerns stood against more utopian ideals regarding the future of society. Another crucial point involved both parties' positions towards the army, an institution which is well-integrated in the Swiss economy and politics, and is socially much more accepted than in other countries. The split between the moderate "cucumber-greens" (green inside and outside) and the radical "water-melon-greens" (outside green and inside red) inevitably took place. The more moderate groups which were united into the *Föderation der Grünen Parteien der Schweiz (GPS)* wanted to be active within the existing political and social system, whereas the more radical and alternative groups were in favour of fundamental social changes and formed the *Grüne Alternative der Schweiz (GRAS)*

Both parties showed quite disappointing results in the 1983 elections. With 1.7 percent of the vote, the moderate *GPS* gained two seats and came to a total of three representatives in the National Council, the radical *GRAS* achieved 0.8 percent and remained without a single seat. The National Council is the larger of the chambers in the national parliament. In this house each canton is allocated a certain number of seats based on its population. The smaller chamber, the Council of States (*Ständerat*), has only 46 seats

(two per canton). Here the elections are held according to the "majoritarian principle" (*Majorz-System*), by which the winning parties receive all the seats and the losing parties are not represented. Smaller parties have little chance and usually are not represented here.

As the 1987 national elections commenced, the time for fundamental changes in party politics seemed to have come. Acid rain and environmental catastrophes in Chernobyl and in Basel (release of a chemical cloud), raised environmental consciousness. Green parties from both wings, but especially the moderate *GPS* had been very successful in local and cantonal elections. Particularly in the large agglomerations such as Zurich, Bern and Geneva they became a major political force.

Again, in anticipation of the national elections, the green parties attempted to consolidate their national organisations. The green *Föderation der Grünen Parteien der Schweiz (GPS)* tightened its name to *Grüne Partei der Schweiz (GPS)*. The alternative green parties gained support from the left-wing parties who were struggling with personal and legitimacy problems. They reactivated their old national organisation, *GRAS*, under the new name of *Grünes Bündnis Schweiz (GBS)*. No further attempt was made to unite the two wings of the green movement. The *GPS* felt strong enough to stand alone and desperately avoided any association with left-wing and alternative ideas.

Speculations based upon opinion polls and the electoral success for various cantonal parliaments predicted a substantial gain for the green groups. A new majority of green, green-alternative, social-democratic and other oppositional forces together with the more concerned members of the bourgeois parties seemed possible - especially with regard to environmental issues.

Confronted with such a challenge, the traditional parties turned green. Environmental problems dominated the preelectoral period and the traditional cleavages seemed to disappear. Hence the Greens once again showed quite disappointing results. With 5.1 percent of the vote, nine of the 200 seats in the National Council (*Nationalrat*) went to the *GPS* and 4.3 percent of the vote and five seats to the *GBS*. The would-be coalition partner, the Social Democrats, lost six seats and the bourgeois parties (the Free Democratic, the Christian Democratic Party and the Swiss People's Party) were able to hold their share. If there was any change, apart from the few new seats gained, it took place within the traditional parties. Environmental candidates were widely preferred. Apparently, environmental problems did not polarize the party system as much as the left-right

dimension had in the past. Concerned voters could choose from a variety of candidates from right, left and green lists, all of whom were putting forward ecologist demands.

The failure of the green groups to live up to the high expectations must be scrutinized through a closer look at the electoral system. Elections for the National Council are held according to a system of proportional representation (*Proporz-System*). By the *Proporz-System* the number of the seats each party receives depends on its share of the vote. This system, in fact, is meant to give smaller parties more weight. But since voting districts are drawn along cantonal lines, the less populous cantons send only a few representatives to the *Nationalrat* and the number of votes needed to win a seat lays far beyond the means of new and smaller parties. The green parties therefore presented themselves in only 18 of the 26 cantons, and in quite a few of these they did not stand any real chance of winning a seat.

Organisational Structure

On the national level, the moderate *Grüne Partei der Schweiz (GPS)* is a federally grown coalition of 11 branches in 10 cantons with a weak organisational structure. Up to two branches per canton can be members of the national party as long as they do not compete with one another. A special "observer" status is reserved for groups which can not or do not wish to become full members immediately. Two bodies coordinate the national activities: the Meeting of Delegates and the Executive Board. At the Meeting of Delegates (legislative) which takes place twice a year, the branches send their representatives according to their vote in cantonal elections. Decisions require a double majority: a majority of branches as well as a majority of delegates must agree. The executive is comprised of one member from each branch. The president is elected every two years, but a reelection is possible. It was not until the end of the 1987 elections that a national secretariat was set up.

The *Grüne Bündnis Schweiz (GBS)* the national organisation of the green-alternative parties still exists only pro forma. They came together and agreed on a common agenda, primarily so that they might participate in the 1987 national elections, and in order to gain the necessary media support. Time will tell whether a national body will be established to coordinate the activities of the green alternative forces. Up to now, the *GBS* is not much more than a name for a group of politically diverse and very active parties in different parts of Switzerland.

For both green wings the emphasis is on the regional level. Most decisions are made at general meetings. An executive deals with everyday politics and puts forward political issues on behalf of the members. Nevertheless, since neither the decision-making process nor the selection of candidates is highly formalized, the party control is rather weak. Party leaders and representatives can acquire a far-reaching autonomy and sometimes go their own ways. A *GPS*-member of the national parliament, for example, suddenly joined another parliamentary group, very much against the will of his own party.

Members of parliament (MP's) are of vital importance to the green parties finances. *GPS* Delegates are required to pay 10 percent of the income from their parliamentary job to the party fund. Parliamentary fractions (usually five MP's from one party) receive a special refund which allows their parties to establish a paid secretariat. The costly elections usually cause the green parties enormous financial problems. At the time of the 1987 elections, the *GBS* was prepared to pay interest on loans.

It is not easy to establish the exact number of members of political parties. Some parties refuse to disclose these figures, while others do not know them themselves. Today the *GPS* has approximately 4,500 members. They have considerably increased their support from less than 1000 members in 1983. Compared to the four big parties (*FdP*, *CVP*, *SPS* and *SVP*), which claim to have between 60,000 and 140,000 members, this does not seem overwhelming, but more important for party activities is the number of active members. Here, the green parties have a considerable advantage over traditional parties.

Although politicians from the fringe of the traditional parties joined the moderate *GPS*, most of the members do not have a political background. *GPS* members cover a wide age range, and include a remarkable share of women. They are mainly middle class, home owners, teachers, architects, doctors and engineers. Quite a few deal with ecological problems professionally. Loose personal and ideological connections to environmental organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund (*WWF*), the Swiss Association for the Protection of the Environment (*SGU*), and an alternative automobile organisation (*VCS*) are also common.

Green alternative groups borrow their members from a broad array of social-change-oriented political movements. The *GPS* unites people from many left-wing parties and progressive unions, as well as from social movements such as the womens movement, the anti-

nuclear movement, the peace movement, the Third World movement, army opponents and activists in grassroot mobilisation. Many members are previously acquainted as a result of other common political activities. Rather strong ties still exist with progressive and alternative groups or movements, on the individual as well as the collective level.

Electoral Support

As the Swiss green parties have not yet established strong party ties and a large and loyal electoral base, floating voters are of a vital importance. At the national elections in 1983 almost half of the vote for the *GPS* came from people without firm party relations. This is more than twice as many as for the traditional parties. A representative sample of voters reveals that the Green Party (*GPS*) finds its strongest support among people under forty years of age, from women and from those living in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. No significant urban-rural difference was found (Longchamp 1984).

Switzerland is a highly federalistic country comprised of 26 relativey autonomous cantons and communities. Accordingly, its political system is divided into three levels - federal, cantonal and communal (local) - each of which has its own executive and legislative bodies. Environmental groups are powerful in the large agglomerations such as Zurich, Bern, Geneva and Lausanne. New and smaller parties are usually more successful on the regional level. They do not have the recources to lead a nationwide campaign and to put forward a homogenous program. The branches are relatively independent and have the flexibility to take regional characteristics in account. And since most local and cantonal parliaments follow the principle of proportional representation, by which there is no quorum (except in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, where the quorum lies between 5 and 10 percent of the vote) the minimum percentage of the vote required to send a representative to the parliament is lower than on the national level.

Considering the usual stability of the Swiss political system, there has been an important shift toward the greens in the cantonal elections of the past five years. Since 1983 the moderate *GPS* has gained 44 seats and now holds 56 seats in six cantonal parliaments. This amounts to just over 6 percent of the total of 900 seats in these cantons. Environmentalists were most successful in Zurich and in Baselland, where they won more than 10 percent of the vote. A total of 21 ecologist groups, eight of which belong to the moderate greens

(GPS), are represented in 16 cantonal parliaments. In nine of these they reached fractional size (five or more seats).

As electoral success on the national level is more elusive, only half of the cantons in which green and green alternative parties are represented have sent an environmentalist to the national parliament. These are usually cantons in which a green parliamentary group already exists in the cantonal parliament. Since their emergence on the national scene, the green parties have continuously increased their share of vote, but at the slow pace which characterizes political change in Switzerland.

Table 13.1
Green Representation in the National Parliament in Switzerland

	Green Party (GPS)		Green Alternative Parties		
	% of Vote	Seats	% of Vote	Seats	
1979	0.7%	1	-	-	
1983	2.6%	4	0.8%	-	(GRASS)
1987	5.1%	9	4.3%	5	(GBS)

Source: Official Electoral Statistics

It is apparently even more difficult to bring a candidate into the executive. Here the elections are held according to the "Majorz"-system which clearly favours the large parties. A closer look at the results of green candidates at executive elections shows that the voters seem to be willing to give the executive a "green consciousness", but prefer not to give executive power to an environmentalist. Nevertheless, there are a few environmentalists in communal and cantonal executive bodies. They are most strongly represented in the canton of Bern, where the moderate GPS (*Freie Liste Bern*) holds two of the nine executive mandates.

Government Participation

As a whole, the Swiss electoral system is quite conducive to the participation of new and small parties. The *Konkordanzsystem* - a deliberate power-sharing effort, whereby the leaders of the largest parties have agreed to co-govern - has, however, a stabilizing effect. On the national level, for example, the Free Democratic Party (*FdP*),

the Christian Democratic Party (*CVP*), the Social Democratic Party (*SPS*) and the Swiss People's Party (*SVP*) have formed an agreement to constitute the government. Following the so-called "magic formula" (*Zauberformel*), the federal executive (*Bundesrat*) was - for the past thirty years - composed by the following number of party representatives: *FdP* (2), *CVP* (2), *SPS* (2), *SVP* (1). From 1947 to 1963 their share of the vote at the national elections was well over 80 percent. Mainly due to the losses of the Social Democrats, this share fell to 72 percent in 1987. The three bourgeois parties (*FdP*, *CVP* and *SVP*) were able to hold their shares. As yet, the new and small parties have failed to acquire the strength to make new alliances possible. Small oppositional parties are thus forced to collaborate in parliamentary groups. This brings them more power and allows them special rights in the parliament. However, such cooperation often proves to be a rather difficult task, since all the cultural and ideological differences between the parties tend to reemerge within one parliamentary group.

For the 1987 elections the *GPS* tried to avoid connections to existing parties, as well as references to traditional right-left distinctions. They claimed a pragmatic openness to all forces seriously concerned with environmental problems. All proposals from other parties to set up a common fraction were turned down by the *GPS*. At the first meeting of the *GPS* after the 1987 elections the possibility of forming a parliamentary group with the radical *GBS* was discussed. Potential conflicts between conservative parties from the French-speaking part of Switzerland (Vaud, Neuchâtel) and progressive organisations from the German-speaking part (Zürich and Bern) reemerged already.

Programatic Profile

In the light of different groups united in the *GPS*, the party program is - or must be - very vague, restraining from clear positions on actual political issues. The policy of the *GPS* is based on the following five principles which hold for the national party as well as for the cantonal branches: decentralisation, humanism, quality of life, anti-technology and long-term perspectives (Rebeaud 1987). At the core of their political commitment stands the protection of the environment. Although they are opposed to high technology, they do not oppose progress as long as it promotes a better quality of life. This can only be achieved through small-scale and decentralised modes of production. According to the *GPS*, natural resources should not be wasted and an intact world should be left to future generations.

Violence and the manipulation of masses is also clearly rejected. Their activities are aimed at saving the environment and the party is conceived solely as a means to "save the world" from destruction. Should this end be achieved, the party organisation is no longer justified and should dissolve.

Toward the state the *GPS* holds quite a liberal position: Not a strong state, but rather responsible citizens are needed. Because they have attempted to distance themselves from the traditional right-left controversies, they do not take a clear position regarding social issues. In order to "save the world", they demand sacrifice. In such a rich country as Switzerland, the slogan "We must get poorer!" has not been completely unsuccessful. Although they favour limiting army expenses, they do not support the successfully launched initiative to abolish the Swiss army. The *GPS's* interpretation of the state's role in society, their suspicion of the right-left dichotomy and their position towards the army render problematic any contacts with the radical greens which go beyond a purely pragmatic cooperation.

The different groups of the *GBS* also agreed on a minimal program, which reveals some clear points of view with regard to current political disputes: They support withdrawal from nuclear energy, equal rights for men and women and the elimination of the patriarchal role-division, social solidarity with regard to social security and human working conditions, an active peace policy, open borders to political refugees and immigrants, and support for national liberation movements in other countries (Grünes Bündnis 1987). All these positions clearly reveal the parents of the *GBS*: progressive left wing and alternative movements. Since the position of a political group vis-à-vis the highly integrated and widely accepted army is of crucial importance to its success in Switzerland, the initiative to abolish the army was considered too delicate an issue, and was not addressed.

Outlook

The resistance by the greens to establishing a single "umbrella" party - such as the Greens in West Germany - cannot be understood without taking into account the social and the political system in Switzerland. In a historically grown, multilingual, confederation of culturally diverse cantons, the subunits have a remarkable autonomy. The national organisations, even those of the traditional parties, are not "monolithic centralized edifices, but large "girders" uniting the cantonal organisations" (Gruner 1967). The parties are much more important on a cantonal level. Within the same party there are great

differences between the branches. This results in different positions on specific issues and different paroles for plebiscites. Green and alternative parties also reflect regional cleavages. These cleavages, together with the moderate-radical dimension, lead to important differences and make a unification even more difficult. The Social Democrats, the largest "oppositional" party, share governmental responsibilities, but - even if they have been quite progressive on environmental issues - they have failed to integrate other oppositional forces. Since the political system to some extent allows the participation of smaller parties, there is less pressure on green forces to organize into a single party. If both green wings joined forces, the environmentalists would constitute the fifth-largest party on the national level. But such a party would be more heterogenous and prone to unresolvable conflicts. A closer look at the differences in party programs between *GPS* and *GBS* supports this argument. The division into two green parties externalizes the eternal conflict between the pragmatic and moderate greens and the progressive alternative greens, thus avoiding endless theoretical discussions which usually hinder party activities. In any case, the national organisations of both green wings, are already quite heterogenous.

Surely, one of the most important factors in the relative success of the environmentalists is the increasing concern with environmental problems. In such a densely populated country as Switzerland, where nature is considered -not at least for the sake of the tourist industry - to be an important resource, the necessity for environmental protection is becoming widely accepted. Even some nationalists from the extreme right therefore promote environmental causes. Environmental catastrophes contribute to the feeling that "something has to be done". The traditional parties have lost considerable support. Weak party ties, low voter turnout and increasing unconventional political activities (Kriesi 1985) provide evidence for a lack of responsiveness and a certain distrust of the traditional political representation system. A new party which claims to remain above the rigid political structures, which does not mind traditional social cleavages and which offers to fight pragmatically for a better environment undoubtedly has a certain attractiveness.

The Swiss political system has, on the other hand, proved to be very stable over many decades, and according to public opinion, this is one of the reasons for the great welfare of this country. The integration of small parties channels and eventually appeases social discontent. Despite all social changes, the four large parties have been

more or less able to keep their shares over time. The green parties cannot rely on a historically grown stable constituency, and since their concern cuts across the traditional lines of conflict and social cleavages, support has to be constantly negotiated.

Ultimately, it is neither power itself, nor government participation which the moderate Green party (*GPS*) seeks. Their success can therefore not be measured solely in terms of election results. They have clearly helped to raise awareness of environmental problems and they have forced traditional parties to be more sensitive in this regard. They have even spurred a kind of new polarisation within some of the major parties: the more environmentally-concerned candidates in these traditional parties proved to be more successful in the latest elections. The success of the more ambitious *GBS* will, of course, have to be measured otherwise. Fundamental social changes are more difficult to achieve.

The future of the moderate *GPS* will depend primarily on the ability of the government to cope with environmental problems and on the responsiveness of the traditional parties and their ability to integrate ecologist demands into their party platforms. If government and parties fail, there will be an increasing demand for a party like the *GPS*. If they succeed, the moderate greens will be bound to disappear, with some of their members joining existing parties and some of them falling back into inactivity. The future of the *GBS* is more difficult to predict. Whether they will be able to build a viable national organisation depends on their capacity to overcome ideological differences. The union of different groups from the extreme left with alternative movements into one homogenous organisation would come close to a "new historical compromise". Should this unification fail, these groups will continue their struggles independently.