Local Parties in Political and Organizational Perspective

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Urban Policy Challenges

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9

Local Parties in Switzerland

An Active Pillar of the Swiss Political System

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Editors' note: In this chapter, Ladner describes how local party networks maintained by supralocal parties integrate communities into a common framework of political ideas, rules, and procedures and contribute significantly to the overall integration of the political system. Given the highly heterogeneous nature of Swiss society, party networks help overcome the many centrifugal forces stemming from different local and regional traditions. These networks are mutually reinforcing, with central-level parties providing resources and ideological guidance and local levels providing substantial organizational support during elections. Further, the traditional practice of shared power across parties prevails in local, cantonal, and federal bodies of political decisionmaking. As a consequence, parties are disposed to maintain the similar strategies and mutual relationships on all levels of their organization. Thus, although local parties have become numerous, autonomous, and influential, minor parties have not been able to organize sections in smaller communities because they lack the means for establishing themselves on a stable basis within the national political system. This lack of political integration is found to be a main reason for the fleeting nature of most "single-issue parties" emerging out of the various "new social movements" after 1968.

The Swiss Political System and Its Parties

In contrast to their weak position at the national level, Swiss political parties play an important role in local politics. In order to understand the nature of Swiss local parties and explain the varying importance of parties at different political levels, it is first necessary to look briefly at some of

the characteristics of Swiss society, its political system, and its party system. The most outstanding features are social and cultural heterogeneity, federalism and communal autonomy, a multiparty system with proportional representation (power sharing), and consociationalism (consensus democracy).

Besides its wealth, one of the most striking characteristics of the Swiss nation-state is the high level of cultural and social heterogeneity. Four different linguistic groups with their own cultural orientations, two religious traditions of equal importance, and important differences between the mountain areas, rural communities, and the cities all contribute to a high degree of cultural variety within a quite small national entity.

Heterogeneity can create conflict. In Switzerland, such conflict is successfully alleviated by cross-cutting cleavages. Economic, confessional, geographic, and linguistic characteristics do not favor any one particular part of the population. The economic elite is not entirely Protestant but rather is confessionally mixed; wage earners are members either of the Swiss Trade Union Confederation (SGB) or the Christian National Trade Union Configuration (CNG), and linguistic barriers do not correspond to social class. This lack of congruence with regard to social cleavages results in beneficial "cross-pressures." Potential conflict between different social groups is restrained, thus the political stability of the social system is maintained (see, for example, Lijphart 1977; Fagagnini 1988, 124).

Furthermore, the political effect of these social cleavages is weakened by the system of federalism. The result of a long-lasting historical process (Jost 1986, 320), federalism allows autonomous territorial units (cantons) to decide conflictual issues on their own, thus ameliorating the potential conflict inherent in a heterogeneous society (Gruner and Hertig 1983, 44).

The high degree of autonomy maintained by the cantons within the federal state is enjoyed by the communities within the cantons as well. Swiss community governments not only form the lowest level of the state administration but are juristically independent public institutions having their own "constitution," the communal code (Tschäni 1990, 281). It is this measure of power that makes community governance in Switzerland different from that found in communities in other countries (Tschäni 1990, 285).

Swiss communities maintain both a high level of freedom and far-reaching competencies in order to fulfill their tasks and duties. Based on the concept of subsidiarity, all activities that are not explicitly assigned to higher political levels remain within the scope of community authority. Some of the main responsibilities of community government include: creation of the communal code, appointment of community executive and administrative authorities, administration and control of communal finances, assessment of the tax rate, care for the elderly (including con-

struction of homes for the aged), administration of social security and public health (hospitals), and provision of education, waste treatment, electricity, water, gas, and local roads. The community is also in charge of local cultural affairs, decides community citizenship requirements, and holds community property in trust.

As interdependence among the various levels of government has increased in recent years (Scharpf 1977), more and more governmental activities have been delegated to the communities. Although arguably this may lead to increased dependence on higher levels of government, some observers claim that the increased interdependence is not necessarily leading to less autonomy for community governments. In some areas of executive authority, they still retain far-reaching competencies (see Klöti et al. 1993, i), and there are indications that as a result of the new tasks delegated from above, new kinds of decisionmaking have developed (for example, in the field of local and development planning) that have led to an increasing politicization of local conflicts (see, for example, Holtmann 1992, 16).

Their freedom to determine local political institutions and authority, their autonomy in all matters concerning local finance and taxes, and their capacity to develop budgets according to their financial needs thus all illustrate the important position of community government within the Swiss state and society. The importance of their role is even emphasized by the fact that the number of communities has hardly changed over the years. Even though most communities are very small, there has been little fusion among them, let alone the far-reaching territorial reform and reorganization that led to the disappearance of numerous communities in some Northern European countries. In 1850, there were 3,205 communities registered in Switzerland; in 1990, there were 3,021.[1] Since then, eight more communities have disappeared, and with a few exceptions, further change in the number of communities is not expected. Only in the canton of Thurgau, where the reorganization of smaller communities into larger political jurisdictions is planned until the year 2000, and in the cantons of Freiburg, Solothurn, Graubünden, and Tessin, which each have a large number of small communities, will future integration be seen for the moment.

In a heterogeneous society with a federal state structure, the political system needs strong mechanisms of integration to counteract the existing centrifugal forces. Not unusual for small states is a multiparty system, with proportional representation in the executive.

The most outstanding feature of the Swiss party system is the multitude of parties, together with the relative stability in vote share. In the federal Parliament, there are not less than sixteen parties represented, although the four biggest parties still hold almost 70 percent of the votes. Since 1959, these four have acted to form a collegial government, creating

a seven-member executive consisting of two Radical Democrats (FDP), two Christian Democrats (CVP), two Social Democrats (SPS), and one member of the Swiss People's Union (SVP).

The electoral system is important for the structuring of a party system. Unlike winner-take-all electoral systems in which a majority is necessary to obtain a seat in Parliament, the proportional electoral system in Switzerland better regards the existing balance of political forces by lowering the entry hurdles for new and smaller parties.[2]

In Switzerland, the executive is usually elected in a majority vote. Legislatures at all levels are generally elected in proportional voting systems.[3] More than 80 percent of Swiss communities, however, do not have a parliament, and hold elections solely to determine the executives. Only about 30 percent of these communities choose the proportional system; the rest vote based on a majority system. Nevertheless, the important role of power sharing and proportional representation in Swiss political culture is emphasized through the widespread practice of power sharing on a voluntary basis. Here, the strongest party restrains from taking all the seats in the executive, leaving some of them to the smaller parties.

For small and heterogeneous states, a conflict regulation pattern based on consensus seems to be vital.[4] Power sharing instead of a majority party government better fits the need of a pluralistic, culturally and politically fragmented society (Lijphart 1977, 22ff.; Kerr 1987, 111). The Swiss system of consensus democracy, which allows the most important parties to participate in government, provides much more integration than majoritarian systems with a strong division between the parties in government and parties in the opposition.

In a consensus democracy, political problems are solved quietly. Representatives of the main interest groups take part in the decisionmaking process at an early stage and help to find a compromise solution to political problems. At the moment of decision, the legislative body generally accepts this proposition, not willing to endanger a carefully constructed compromise (Gruner and Hertig 1983, 42).

A conflict regulation pattern based on cooperation guarantees political stability but blurs the borders between political interest groups and government actors. It remains unclear whose interests prevail in putting together a proposal (Gruner and Hertig 1983, 43). Political parties tend to lose the possibility of showing their constituents a distinctive political profile. This effect is especially negative for local parties, as their opportunities to put forward a political program are even more limited.

The means of direct democracy in the Swiss consensus system—the initiative and referendum—play the role of "pressure-relief valve." They enable governmental parties to act independently of the parties with

which they share power and thus provide for the possibility of innovation and opposition. For nongovernmental parties, they also offer a well-defined method of interest articulation. Opposition to the government can thus be absorbed and productively channeled into accepted forms of political participation.

Although the initiative and referendum enhance to some degree the emergence of political parties in Switzerland, they also demonopolize them as well. The growing importance of nonpartisan committees and financially strong interest groups during the process of launching and campaigning for an initiative or referendum considerably reduces the influence of the political parties (Kriesi 1986, 338).

At the community level, another form of direct democracy, the communal assembly,[5] also tends to reduce the demand for political parties as representative organizations. The possibility of expressing personal political interests by attending a communal assembly make political parties—especially in smaller communities—functionally obsolete (see Neidhart 1986, 27).

Federalism, cultural heterogeneity, consociationalism, and a proportional representation electoral system almost inevitably lead to a party system with a large number of parties, but cultural differences, cross-cutting cleavages, and a decentralized state organization prove to be powerful barriers to the creation of strong centralized national party organizations.[6] The Swiss national party organizations are rather small and short of resources and sometimes find it very difficult to convince their cantonal sections to join them in a common political platform.

Nevertheless, the extent to which this fragmentation weakens the Swiss party system in general remains an open question. In such a system, intraparty conflicts are difficult to evade (Kriesi 1986, 337), as is evident when one looks at the frequent difference in the positions of the national parties and their cantonal sections during initiative and referendum voting. But different positions within a single party can also have a positive effect by allowing party members and adherents to express different policy preferences while still remaining within the party. From case to case, party members may identify with the cantonal section or with the national party. Furthermore, a decentralized party organization increases flexibility in the face of differing regional characteristics.

In the case of Switzerland, political parties at the community level find themselves in a fairly comfortable situation. Because of the important role community government plays in state and society, the influence of local parties can be considerable. And because the national parties are relatively weak and lack the organizational resources to control their local sections, local parties enjoy a large degree of independence.

Local Parties in Switzerland

With regard to their functions in the political system, there is not much difference between local- and national-level parties. But local parties do find themselves confronted with certain conditions that are specific to their level of political participation. Local parties emerged in Switzerland rather early and today are both widespread and relatively important. They control a considerable level of governmental activity and are concerned, out of necessity or their own initiative, with a wide variety of political issues.[7]

Parties on the Communal Level

In general, the political functions of local parties are not fundamentally different from the functions of political parties on a higher political level. The differences are to be found with regard to their respective political reference points. Within the communities, local parties are confronted with a characteristic social and political context. Different political issues are at stake in local as opposed to national arenas, the political norms are not necessarily the same as in "big politics," and, finally, local parties, as sections of the national party, retain a special position within the overall party organization.

The small size of most communities changes the requirements for local parties and their activities. The smaller the political context, the smaller the functional necessity for intermediate organizations to mediate between citizens and the state (Neidhart 1986, 34). Smaller contexts are easier for citizens to survey and understand, giving them more information about political problems and thus more possibility to intervene personally in the decision process.

This weak functional differentiation of interest representation, however, is strongly tied to a weak institutionalization and formalization of the political process. This has, of course, the advantage that problems can be solved faster and at lower costs, but it also creates a number of inconveniences. The political process sometimes lacks transparency, is difficult to control, and is democratically insufficient (see Neidhart 1986, 35). The weak separation of private, professional, economic, and political issues leads to conflict to the detriment of political parties and results in an increasing distance of the citizens to elections and parties (Neidhart 1986, 34ff.).

The most important function of parties at the communal level is the recruitment and selection of candidates for different political seats (see Nassmacher and Rudzio 1978, 131). However, in small communities, the number of possible candidates is rather limited, and it is quite often impossible to have competitive elections. The political parties therefore favor ascriptive recruitment instead of performance-oriented recruitment of their candidates (Luhmann 1983, 159). Elections can thus lose their power of legitimation.

As we have already seen on the national level, small size and social heterogeneity tend to favor a consensus-style political system (see Lehmbruch 1979, 329). When there is no room to evade conflicts that threaten the functioning of the whole system, the integrative power of a coalition government is needed. Most Swiss communities are small, but their populations are usually more homogeneous than those of the state as a whole. Thus, the heterogeneity argument for consensus government on the local level is less compelling.

A final factor that is indirectly linked to the size of the political context is the degree of politicization of local politics. Most local decisions are not party decisions (see, for example, Lehmbruch 1979, 326). Even if ideology plays a more important role in local politics than is generally believed, the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of many local issues makes it difficult for parties to present a clear political platform. The image of a local party, compared to those at the national or cantonal level, thus depends much more on the qualities (or popularity) of its candidates and members in political office. Its political aims and values are of less importance. In the last few years, however, the degree of politicization at the local level has increased. Especially for the new political issues that have come onto the agenda, there is often no one simple solution. Local parties may thus be finding it easier to put forward a more highly differentiated political profile.

Just as cantons want to be represented at the federal level, so too do communities want to be represented in the decisionmaking process at the cantonal level (see Neidhart 1986, 33). This need to be represented is satisfied through the local parties. Politicians who are representatives of their local party and of their communities often try to get a promising position on the electoral list at the cantonal level. The desire to be represented at a higher level thus facilitates the emergence of local political parties. If a member of the local party becomes a member of the cantonal parliament, the local party gains prestige and power. But the need to be represented can also disturb party consensus and weaken party ties. If local inhabitants believe that cantonal representation is more important, one candidate may receive votes that would normally go to another party.

Another important quality of local parties is their position in the larger party organization, especially within the cantonal and national party. Almost 90 percent of local parties are sections of parties that are also active on higher political levels. The relationship between the local party and

the mother party differs from party to party. The hierarchy of the party organization and the division of competencies within the party play an important role. Do the members of the local parties decide on the political program and the party activities through their delegates to the national party meeting, or do members of the national party executive board decide on the party program for all local sections?

In a multilevel party organization, local parties usually form the basis of the party. In most cases, their responsibility is to organize party membership. They charge membership dues and send a part of the money to party organizations at a higher level. They recruit party officials from their own rank and file and support the higher-level party in their election and referenda campaigns, either directly through their own campaign activities or indirectly through activists who are often important opinion leaders within the community. Local parties transmit the wishes of their base-party members to their mother party and, through their delegates, participate in intraparty decision processes.

The advantages local parties receive from the larger party organizations are less concrete than those they themselves provide to the party, though they are not necessarily less important. The higher-level party is responsible for a consistent set of references. Through its programmatic achievements, the mother party offers local parties an ideological platform. It keeps them informed on cantonal and national issues and offers the rank-and-file party members the possibility of political careers. And finally, it represents the interests of the local parties on higher political levels.

The integration of a local party into the larger party system also has its disadvantages. The policy proposals of the national or cantonal party may be adverse to the specific interests of the local party's community. However, like cantonal party sections that sometimes take a different position in national elections and referenda voting, local parties cannot always be forced strictly to follow the party line. They are relatively autonomous and cannot be considered as simple branches of the cantonal or national party. The party organization on each level is only responsible for the political issues to be decided on its own level. Potential interlevel conflicts are thus systematically avoided. Issues on other political levels can be discussed, but usually, the party organization that is not on that level restrains itself from putting forward its own position.

To what extent Swiss local parties are Janus-faced, as Gerhard Lehmbruch (1979) suggested was true of local parties in West Germany, remains an open question. On the one hand, local parties deal with relatively apolitical local issues, where local interests and the influence of local elites are very powerful; on the other hand, they are enmeshed in party politics at a higher level, the aim of which is to provide citizens

with broad ideological and programmatic positions to influence their electoral decisions. There are strong reasons to believe that local parties in Switzerland stick to the former, more local arena.

The Emergence of Local Parties

Political parties emerged in Switzerland in the middle of the nineteenth century. They did not originate from parliamentary party groups as in other countries but rather came into being as organizations of citizens entitled to vote (Gruner 1977, 25ff.).

What finally initiated the foundation of parties is the subject of some controversy. Erich Gruner (1977, 25ff.), for example, calls the political parties "children of civic rights" and stresses the constitutive or even causal effect of the right to vote and the use of direct democracy. Elections and referenda campaigns in several cantons led to large-scale political mobilization and finally to the emergence of political parties. In this view, the foundation of political parties in Switzerland is seen as the result of grassroots mobilization leading directly to mass or catch-all parties that came into existence much later in other countries. Case studies, however, seem to show that political parties emerged out of existing nonpolitical societal institutions and gatherings of elites (see Jost 1986, 324). From this point of view, the foundation of political parties came "from above." Mass mobilization was provoked and directed by a political elite formed at the end of the eighteenth century, which, with its various social organizations and circles, already controlled an important communication network (Jost 1986, 324). Regardless of which view is correct, Swiss political parties managed rather early to organize a larger part of the population than other equivalent countries.

Swiss local parties emerged much earlier than in Germany, where, especially in rural areas, local parties were founded only after postwar communal reforms (Schneider 1991, 135).[8] At the end of the nineteenth century, some Swiss communities already had their own local parties, as a closer look at the dates of party foundation reveals (see Figure 9.1). Local sections of the Radical Democrats, Christian Democrats, and, to a lesser extent, Social Democrats emerged in several cantons between 1890 and 1900.[9]

The foundation of local parties was not restricted to towns, canton capitals, and rural centers but also took place in smaller communities. There are strong reasons to believe that independent local parties emerged according to the structure of the local population and its political preferences and eventually joined one of the larger parties. The emergence of local party systems was not the result of a process of colonialization directed by the political centers.
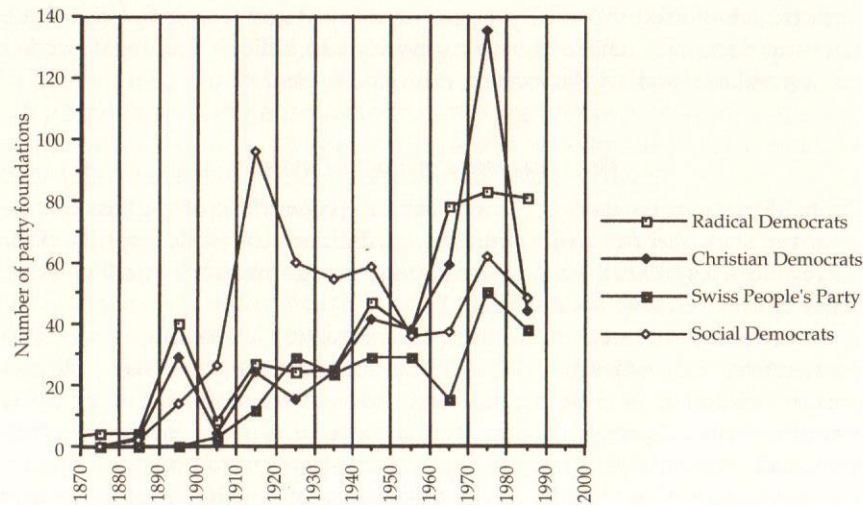
FIGURE 9.1   The Emergence of the Local Party System: The Four Parties in
Federal Government

Diffusion and Number

Even though most Swiss communities are very small, only about one-third of them are without political organizations (see Table 9.1). A closer look at the size of these communities reveals that only the smallest are without political organizations. Communities with 1,000 or more inhabitants almost always have political organizations, which is quite remarkable by international standards.

TABLE 9.1   Communities with Political Groups by Population Size

	Percent of Communities	N
All communities	63.3	2,035
1–249	21.7	420
250–499	37.5	365
500–999	63.6	382
1,000–1,999	88.2	346
2,000–4,999	97.5	321
5,000–9,999	100.0	119
10,000+	100.0	82

SOURCE: Communal secretary survey, 1994.

There are more than 6,000 political groups and parties organized in the 3,000 communities of Switzerland.[10] The average number of groups increases from almost one in the smallest communities to nine groups in the largest. Around 84 percent of these groups are sections of parties that are also active on the national level (see Table 9.2). The largest proportion of these, 70 percent of the total, belong to one of the four parties in federal government, that is, the Radical Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, and the Swiss People's Party. Groups that are not organized on a higher political level are mainly village and communal associations, electoral associations, green-alternative groups, and political parties of local or regional significance.

The total number of political groups at the communal level has not substantially increased since 1988. There are even reasons to believe that the number has been reduced.[11] This trend does not manifest itself nationwide, but occurs mostly in the French-speaking cantons and the Italian-speaking Tessin, as well as in some smaller communities. In the larger communities and cities, especially in German-speaking Switzerland, the number of political groups has increased. Thus, in rural areas, where party membership and political participation until now have been

TABLE 9.2   Political Groups in Swiss Communities

	%	%	No.	No.
Sections of parties in federal government	69.4	–	3,148	–
Radical Democrats (FDP)	–	21.5	–	974
Christian Democrats (CVP)	–	17.7	–	801
Social Democrats (SPS)	–	17.0	–	772
Swiss People's Party (SVP)	–	13.2	–	601
Sections of other "national" parties	14.4	14.4	654	654
Communal groups	16.2	–	734	–
Green-alternative groups	–	2.5	–	113
Village and communal associations	–	4.4	–	198
Electoral groups	–	3.1	–	142
Parties of local or regional scope	–	3.5	–	160
Others	–	2.7	–	121
Total	100.0	100.0	4,536	4,536

NOTE: "Other" national parties: Christian Social Party (CSP), Independents' Party (LDU), Protestant People's Party (EVP), Liberal Party (LPS), Green Party (GPS), Progressive Organizations of Switzerland (POCH), Communist Party (PDA), other left-wing parties, Swiss Democrats (SD), Swiss Motorists' party (AP), League of the Tessins (Lega), other right wing parties.

SOURCE: Communal secretary survey, 1994. Basis: About 70 percent (=2,036) of the communities.

based on traditional patterns of behavior, the ongoing erosion of party ties has an important impact in the reduction of political groups. In the larger communities, however, in accordance with the patterns of current social change, the process of political diversification results in an increasing number of groups.

Influence and Position

Because of their large number, the local parties are rather important in Switzerland. This can be seen both by looking at the influence attributed to them and observing the number of seats in communal executives held by members of local political parties.

In our survey of about 2,300 communal secretaries in 1988 (see Ladner 1991), local political parties were seen as the most important collective actors trying to influence political decisions from outside the government (see Table 9.3). Although seen as somewhat less influential than citizens as a whole, they are viewed as more important than local associations and citizens' and grassroots committees. They also have more influence than local elites, businesspeople, and farmers. Within government, the

TABLE 9.3　Influence on Local Politics and Size of Communities, 1988

Political Actors	Influence 1988 All Communities[a]	Up to 2,000 Inhabitants	2000– 10,000 Inhabitants	10,000 and + Inhabitants
Communal executive	5.1	4.9	5.7	5.8
Major	4.6	4.4	5.1	5.4
Other members in public office	4.3	4.2	4.7	5.2
Citizens	4.1	3.9	4.6	4.8
Political parties	3.4	2.7	5.1	5.8
Farmers	2.9	3.1	2.6	1.8
Local associations	2.4	2.1	2.9	3.1
Local elites	2.3	2.2	2.4	2.3
Ad hoc groups/ "grassroots"	2.2	2.0	2.5	3.2
Local merchants	2.1	1.8	2.8	3.3
Private enterprises	1.4	1.2	1.7	2.2
Media (press)	1.4	1.1	2.1	3.4
Church	1.4	1.4	1.6	1.7

[a] Average influence measured on a scale reaching from 1 (no influence) to 7 (strong influence); in absolute numbers.

SOURCE: Communal secretary survey, 1988. Based on the answers of about 2,300 communities.

communal executive is perceived to have the most influence on local decisionmaking, followed by the mayor and other members in public office. The local parties are of course well represented in the communal executive and other political committees and very often hold the office of the mayor, so that their influence is in fact even greater than depicted in the survey.

The influence of local parties turns out to be much larger when one takes a closer look at the size of the communities. The influence of other political actors, like local associations and ad hoc groups, increases with the number of inhabitants, and this effect is even greater for local parties. In middle-sized communities, local parties hold the second position in ranking of influence just behind the communal executive, and in the largest communities, they share the leading position with the executive. In the largest communities, their influence is far greater than that of local associations, interest groups, and ad hoc and grassroots groups, which are often seen as the most important forms of political participation for the future.

Nevertheless, in recent years the category of ad hoc and grassroots groups has increased its influence considerably. This can be seen as a sign that new forms of political participation are gaining at the local level. The mass media have also become more and more important, which is not unexpected. But local political parties also report an average influence increase as well, so their position in the influence ranking remains unchanged.

Local parties also successfully achieve their most important function—the recruitment of candidates for political offices. About three-fourths of the communal executive seats in Switzerland are held by members of political parties. This is an astonishingly high percentage. In some states (Bundesländern) in West Germany, in comparison, "free voters" and electoral groups play a more important role in communal elections, resulting in a lower proportion of seats being held by political parties, even though party organizations are much larger and stronger than in Switzerland (see, for example, Gabriel 1991, 376ff.).

A closer look at the party membership of the members of the communal executives reveals that they are almost exclusively represented by parties that are also active on the national level (see Table 9.4). The three right-wing parties—the Radical Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and the Swiss People's Party—dominate representation at the local level, together holding more than half the executive seats. With a little more than 10 percent of the seats, the Social Democrats are underrepresented, compared to their electoral strength on the national level. This is mainly due to the fact that the Social Democrats have little influence in the smaller rural communities. In larger communities and in the cities, they

TABLE 9.4   Representation of Political Parties in Communal Executives (in percent)

Party	Share of the Seats in 1988[a]	Share of the Seats in 1994[b]
Radical Democrats (FDP)	22.2	19.9
Christian Democrats (CVP)	21.4	18.5
Swiss People's Party (SVP)	17.2	14.9
Social Democrats (SPS)	10.8	10.0
Christian Social Party (CSP)	1.9	1.8
Liberal Party (LPS)	1.5	1.3
Protestant People's Party (EVP)	0.4	0.5
Independents' Party (LDU)	0.4	0.2
United Socialist Party (PSU)	0.3	–
Green Party (GPS/GBS)	0.2	0.2
Other left-wing parties (PdA/POCH/SAP)	0.1	0.0
Other right-wing parties (NA/OeFP)	0.0	0.1
Freedom Party ex Motorists' Party (FP ex AP)	–	0.1
League of the Tessins (Lega)	–	0.2
Other parties	3.2	5.6
Independents/no party membership	20.3	26.5
Total	100.0	100.0
N (seats)	13,485	11,194

[a] Based on about 80 percent of the communities.
[b] Based on about 70 percent of the communities.
SOURCE: Communal secretary survey, 1988 and 1994.

are more successful. From 1988 to 1994, the number of party members in communal executives has decreased, which is very much in accordance with what was revealed by the previous results on organizational strength. In some cantons, and especially in smaller communities, non-party members have become more important.

Nevertheless, the representation of political parties in communal governments and their influence on local politics still remain very high. This poses a considerable contrast with the weak position of Swiss political parties in general. Parties on the national level, especially parties on the right, are weakly organized and are often called mere parent organizations of the cantonal parties. They lack resources, and their organizations lack professionalism. In the communities, the voluntary basis of party activity (Milizsystem) is less harmful to the parties, federalism does not weaken organizational unity, and communal autonomy offers a wide range of political activities and issues. Swiss local parties are thus much more powerful.

The influence local parties exercise on their members in public office is of course crucial. Even though there is no "binding mandate" in Switzerland,[12] political parties do have some influence on the political decisions made by their members in public office. But if a party member in office becomes a statesman (see Rhinow 1986, 114), the party tends to lose this influence.[13]

Our survey of local parties in 1990 (see Geser et al. 1994) reveals the relative independence of party members in office. Only about 13 percent of local party presidents say that their party has a large influence on their representatives in office. About one-half of them consider this influence to be moderate, 32 percent believe it is small, and 8 percent state that the party has no influence at all (see Table 9.5).

Among the four parties in federal government, the local party presidents of the Social Democrats believe their influence on their representatives in office to be the greatest, with 70 percent stating that their influence is large or moderate. This seems to be in accordance with the self-esteem of left-wing militants, who strongly consider themselves to be representatives of their party.[14] Local party presidents of the Swiss People's Party believe that they have the least control over the members in office when compared to the other parties. The size of the community as well as the language area do not seem to influence in a significant way

TABLE 9.5   Influence of Local Parties on Their Members in Public Office

Influence[a] on Their Members in Office	Large (%)	Moderate (%)	Small (%)	No Influence (%)	N
All parties	13	48	32	8	2,385
Radical Democrats (FDP)	13	47	33	8	610
Christian Democrats (CVP)	13	47	32	9	527
Swiss People's Party (SVP)	11	35	43	12	275
Social Democrats (SPS)	13	57	27	4	517
Independents' Party (LDU)	8	46	40	6	48
Protestant People's Party (EVP)	4	43	43	10	70
Christian Social Party (CSP)	21	55	24	–	29
Liberal Party (LPS)	25	57	17	2	53
Green Party (GPS/GBS))	14	54	32	–	28
Green-alternative groups	20	40	33	7	30
Village and communal associations	14	40	37	9	43
Electoral groups	11	41	34	15	76
Interest associations	19	31	44	6	16

[a] According to the presidents of the local parties.
SOURCE: Local party presidents survey, 1990.

the relationship between the parties and their representatives in public office.

Party members in public office attest to a certain amount of independence. It remains an open question how independent they feel when they make their decisions and to what extent they take advantage of their alleged freedom. It seems very unlikely that they continuously make decisions against the will of their parties. And finally, as a result of the limited number of people interested in politics in smaller communities, party offices and public offices are often held by the same individuals.[15] Thus, there is often no discrepancy between the party executive and the party member in public office.

Activities and Issues

What about the activities of the local parties? Which activities are most common and what are the main political issues of local parties? To answer these questions, we have to remember at least three characteristics of the Swiss political system that strongly influence the way political parties choose their political issues and become active.

The various forms of direct democracy on the local level force local parties to be active not only before elections but also between them. With their own proposals or initiatives, they are partly responsible for seeking input from outside the political decisionmaking system of the community. In the course of initiatives, referendums, and election campaigns at higher political levels, they are not only asked to make decisions on concrete political issues, but they are also invited to support their mother party in its activities. A multiparty system, which is common especially in the larger communities, demands a strong political profile from the parties. Unlike in a two-party-system, where both parties seek voters in the middle of the political spectrum, a multiparty system both requires and provides room for thematic and programmatic differences between parties.

Finally, the system of consociationalism incorporates the most important parties into the local government. On the communal level, this usually includes all the larger political groups. Local parties thus have, on the one hand, the possibility to influence political decisions within the limits of their political strength, but, on the other hand, they must also be responsible for governmental decisions that clearly bear the mark of other parties. Of course, the Swiss system of consociationalism also offers governmental parties, especially by means of direct democracy, the possibility of going into opposition and promoting alternative political views. To be in the opposition and in the government at the same time demands an enormous amount of political skill and is hardly appreciated

by the other parties in government, especially when the tendency toward opposition becomes too strong.

Especially in the smaller communities, local party organizations differ considerably from party organizations on higher political levels. On the cantonal or national level, some of the party work, even if relatively small by international standards, is done by professionals for which politics is part of the daily routine. On the communal level, party work is done on the basis of the militia system (volunteer system), which means people are only occupied with politics in the evenings or weekends. The scope and depth of activities by local parties is therefore almost necessarily less than at higher political levels.

Intraparty activities as well as efforts to influence political decisions provide an indication of how successfully a local party is playing a role in local politics. These activities, of course, also depend on the size of their communities and on their political background and may differ from case to case. On average, local parties hold about four party meetings a year (see Table 9.6). The party leadership, the executive, meets about

TABLE 9.6   Intraparty Activities, Size of Communities, and Ideological Background of Local Parties

	Number of Party Meetings Per Year	Number of Party Executive Meetings Per Year
All together	4.1	6.6
Up to 2,000 inhabitants	2.8	5.6
2,000–10,000 inhabitants	4.5	6.8
10,000 inhabitants and more	6.3	9.1
Right-wing parties	3.4	6.3
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	5.9	7.5
Up to 2,000 inhabitants		
Right-wing parties	2.5	5.6
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	4.1	5.8
2,000–10,000 inhabitants		
Right-wing parties	3.8	6.6
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	6.2	7.1
10,000 inhabitants and more		
Right-wing parties	5.3	8.1
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	8.1	11.3

NOTE: Average frequency.

SOURCE: Local party presidents survey, 1990. Based on the answers of about 2,500 local parties.

seven times a year. It is perhaps striking that the party executive does not meet more often compared to the number of party meetings. Given that the organization of a party meeting almost always requires the meeting of the party executive, there is not much room left for political projects and programmatic party work. The small difference between the number of meetings of the party and the executive is perhaps easier to understand when one considers the fact that often in local parties, there is no clear division between executive functions (party leadership) and legislative functions (party assembly). Often, all militants are members of the party executive, either meeting exclusively (party executive meeting) or in a more open forum (party meeting). Finally, the number of party meetings also depends on the number of communal assemblies. Usually, local parties meet a few days before a communal assembly to discuss the political issues at stake and to join in a common platform.

The frequency with which local party meetings are held depends first of all on the size of a community. Local parties in communities with more than 10,000 inhabitants meet about twice as often as local parties in communities with less than 2,000 inhabitants, and the frequency of party executive meetings is also considerably higher in larger communities. This is partly due to a greater number of political issues and a higher degree of politicization in larger communities. In smaller communities where frequent personal contact is common, party decisions can almost be made across the garden fence or over a glass of beer, and there is no need to organize a party meeting.

Left-wing, green, and alternative groups gather more often than right-wing parties. This is true for both forms of meetings, with the differences between the two groups of parties more accentuated as far as party assemblies are concerned. This might be because left-wing parties at the same time tend to use more formalized principles of organization and are also inclined to grassroots democracy.

Even though having a large number of party meetings does not necessarily mean that these political activities are of high quality, still, the extent of intraparty activities on the local level in Switzerland seems to be rather low. Because of direct democracy, citizens are constantly asked to decide on political issues, and about four times a year, they vote on national initiatives or referenda. A party meeting every four months in small communities and every two months in larger ones is thus not very frequent. However, considering that most party work is done on a voluntary basis in the spare time of the politicians and that there are many more political issues to be decided on at communal levels than in other countries, the degree of party activity is remarkably high.

Local political parties use a wide variety of methods to attain their political objectives, from lobbying to more traditional means of political

participation (elections, referenda) as well as campaigning through the mass media. The favored activity of local parties is contacting politicians in public office directly. About 80 percent of local parties state that they try to talk to the people in charge to achieve their political goals. This method is followed in popularity by the organization of political meetings and events and by promoting candidates for public office. Public demonstrations and public activities tend not to be very popular (see Figure 9.2).

Again, the form of activity chosen depends on the size of the community and on the political background of the local party (see Table 9.7). With one exception, local parties in larger communities use all of these forms of activity more often than in smaller communities. This is, of course, closely connected to the different structure of the political system in larger contexts. Media events and public demonstrations in particular are more a part of everyday politics in the more anonymous and party-polarized larger communities. In smaller communities, these activities are simply not appropriate. Proposals and initiatives are also more important in larger communities. The generally lower level of party activities in smaller communities may be responsible for this. The only exception is the method of lobbying people in public office directly, which does not seem to depend on the size of the community. Thus, in larger communities, local parties are much more public in their activities, whereas in smaller communities, local parties are much more public in their activities, whereas
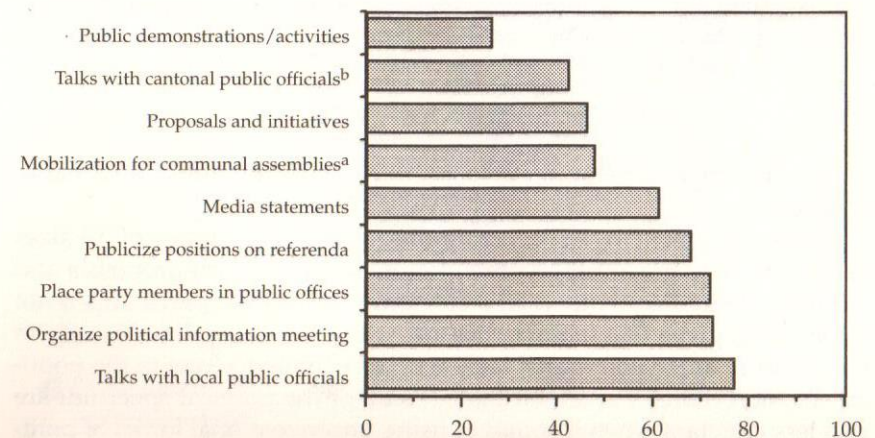

FIGURE 9.2   Local Party Activities (percentage of parties)

[a] Parties from communities with communal assemblies only.
[b] Sections of cantonal parties only.

TABLE 9.7 Different Political Activities, Size of Communities, and Ideological Background of Local Parties (in percent)

	Talks/Contacts with People in Public Office	Media Statements/ Information	Proposals and Initiatives	Public Demonstrations/ Activities
All together	77	62	47	27
Up to 2,000 inhabitants	75	35	29	14
2,000–10,000 inhabitants	80	78	55	29
10,000 inhabitants and more	77	91	74	58
Right-wing parties	80	59	43	18
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	69	70	58	50
Up to 2,000 inhabitants				
Right-wing parties	77	34	28	11
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	66	40	35	28
2,000–10,000 inhabitants				
Right-wing parties	85	76	52	19
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	70	81	63	51
10,000 inhabitants and more				
Right-wing parties	81	92	68	43
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	69	88	84	85

SOURCE: Local party presidents survey, 1990. Based on the answers of about 2,500 local parties.

direct contacts and informal talks seem to be better suited for smaller contexts.

Left-wing, green, and alternative parties in communities of all sizes use activities that directly address the public and launch proposals and initiatives more frequently than their right-wing counterparts. This is not astonishing, given that these parties are, with a few exceptions, usually in the minority at the communal level and have limited access to the political decision center. Parties on the left side of the political spectrum are also less reluctant when it comes to using unconventional forms of political participation. Accordingly, the biggest difference between left- and right-wing parties is in the area of public demonstrations.

When looking at the political issues local parties are concerned with, we have to keep in mind that due to the principle of subsidiarity, Swiss

communities are responsible for a wide range of political tasks. The local parties therefore also have to be very versatile.

The most important policy fields in which Swiss local parties are active are "traffic planning/road construction," "local and development planning," and "garbage/rubbish." More than 40 percent of the groups questioned have proposed initiatives in these three fields of local politics (see Figure 9.3). Other communal issues like "budget/account/taxes," "building and construction," and "development of the community" follow as the next most common. Between 35 and 40 percent of the parties have proposed initiatives in these fields, and more than half of the groups have been engaged in them without actually initiating proposals.

In social fields like "social security/welfare," "health service," and "youth work," the parties were significantly less proactive. Still, more than half of the parties state that they remain committed in these fields. Some of the parties might find it appropriate to have a social image without being very strongly committed and actually initiating proposals. Also, some 45 percent of local parties that call themselves active in
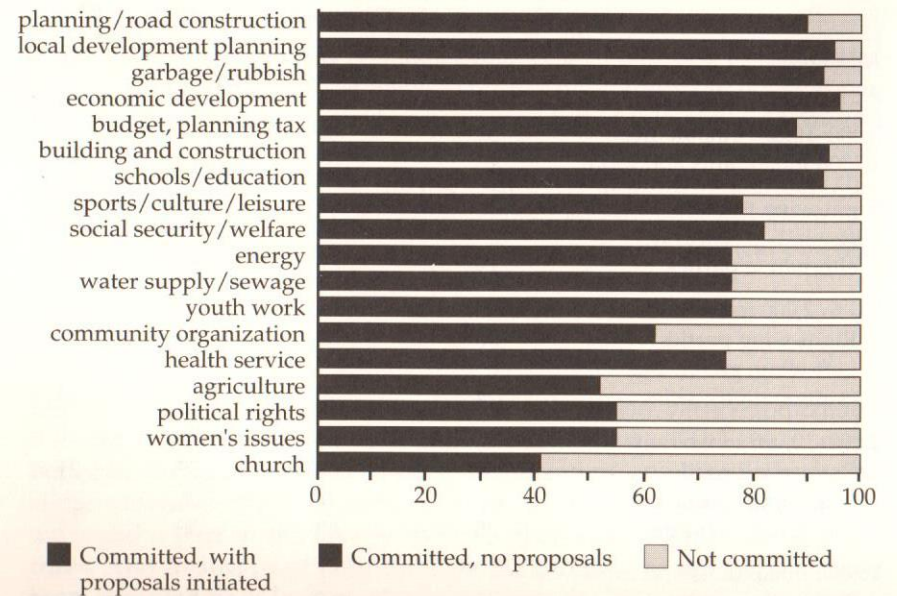

FIGURE 9.3 Party Commitment in Different Fields of Communal Politics (in percent)

SOURCE: Local party presidents survey, 1990.

"women's issues" seem to put public relations and electoral tactics first and political commitment second.

Once more, there are quite important differences when we look at the different size of the communities. In all four political fields mentioned in Table 9.8, the commitment of the parties increases with the size of the community. It could also be shown here that in larger communities, local parties are generally more actively engaged in a greater number of political fields. This result is very much in accordance with the correspondence between activity level and size.

Of course, the ideological background of a local party influences its political commitment. Right-wing parties are more active when building and construction questions are at stake, whereas left, green, and alternative groups are more strongly committed to the fields "traffic planning/

TABLE 9.8   Commitment in Four Different Political Fields, Size of Community, and Ideological Background of Local Parties (in percent)

	Building and Construction	Traffic Planning/ Road Construction	Garbage/ Rubbish	Social Security/ Welfare
All together	35	46	42	28
Up to 2,000 inhabitants	35	36	39	24
2,000–10,000 inhabitants	32	49	43	27
10,000 inhabitants and more	46	68	49	41
Right-wing parties	38	42	38	23
Left-wing, green, and alternative parties	29	58	54	40
Up to 2,000 inhabitants				
Right-wing parties	38	35	37	20
Left-wing, green, and				
alternative parties	24	40	46	39
2,000–10,000 inhabitants				
Right-wing parties	34	43	37	21
Left-wing, green, and				
alternative parties	25	62	56	39
10,000 inhabitants and more				
Right-wing parties	48	63	44	38
Left-wing, green, and				
alternative parties	44	77	59	48

SOURCE: Local party presidents survey, 1990. Based on the answers of about 2,500 local parties.

road construction," "garbage/rubbish," and "social security/welfare." This pattern holds for all three categories of size and clearly reveals the different preferences of the different political parties. The commitment of the left and green parties is focused on social and environmental questions.

The commitment of parties on the left side of the political spectrum is necessarily more evident, given that they are usually not as strongly integrated into the center of power and political decisionmaking. Parties of the left are more often forced to launch initiatives and try to influence political decisions from outside the political system, whereas right-wing parties take advantage of their informal contacts and do not have to be formally proactive.

Further analysis shows that local parties are committed to a larger number of political issues than they are actively engaged in. This would seem to indicate that there is a strong reactive element in local politics. Unlike political parties on higher political levels, local parties lack the resources to push forward political ideas in all fields of local politics. Local party politics is thus even less programmatic than general party politics. As is shown by their activities and fields of commitment, most local parties operate on a more reactive than proactive basis.

Nevertheless, in the Swiss political system, an important number of political decisions have to be made every year in addition to the numerous elections on all political levels. This not only offers the political parties a large scope for political participation but is also very demanding. Accordingly, local parties constantly need a minimal degree of activism. In times of political crisis or during controversial political conflicts (like the referenda about whether Switzerland should join the European Economic Area, or EEA), local parties have a remarkable political potential and may quickly become very active.

Local Parties: Changes in the Base

Local parties play an important role within the larger party organization, both for the cantonal party and for the national party. To become a member of the national or cantonal party organization, one usually has to become a member of a local section. Local parties charge membership fees and send a part of the money to the higher-level organizational structures. And finally, most politicians on the cantonal or federal level have been recruited from local parties.

In a federalist state with far-reaching communal autonomy, it is not surprising that the party organizations at the different state levels operate relatively independently. National- and cantonal-level parties often express the desire to integrate local parties much more closely into their

everyday party work, whereas local parties are rather hesitant in this respect and are reluctant even to communicate the addresses or the number of their members. The relationship between the cantonal parties and the local parties is discussed further below.

In recent years, there have been changes in the party system that have made the relationship between the local parties and their mother party problematic. There are indications that the higher-level political parties may be moving away from their base, their local sections. A discussion of the changes in local parties in Switzerland will end this section.

It is quite important for political parties to have their local sections join with them in supporting a common political platform. It has already been said that in a federalist country like Switzerland, this is far from easy, as the national parties sometimes find it very difficult even to bind their cantonal sections into a common political program in the course of voting campaigns.

When asked whether they are influenced by the political platform of their cantonal party, local party presidents did not seem to be very supportive. About two-thirds of the local parties consider the influence of their cantonal party's program to be only moderate. They basically seem to use it only when they really need to.

Nevertheless, on this issue there are differences between the four parties in federal government. The party program of the cantonal party is most important for the local parties of the Social Democrats, least important for the sections of the Radical Democrats. The Christian Democrats' and the Swiss People's Party's positions are somewhere in the middle. This result reflects quite well the differences between the left-wing and right-wing party organizations of the larger parties. Left-wing parties are organized from top to bottom, whereas in right-wing parties, especially those with a more liberal orientation, the programmatic independence of the local sections is greater.[16]

There is a surprising level of agreement among the different parties on what the most important functions of the cantonal party for the local party sections are supposed to be, and vice versa (see Table 9.9). Apart from a few exceptions, the ranking of the different functions in the eyes of the four parties in federal government is identical.

Each of the four main parties agrees that the most important function of the cantonal party for the local party is to provide information about national and cantonal political issues. For the Radical Democrats and the Christian Democrats, the second most important function is general support, whereas for the Social Democrats and the Swiss People's Party, it is the provision of ideological or programmatic references.

The most important function of the local parties for their cantonal party, in the eyes of the local party presidents, is to provide support dur-

TABLE 9.9   Reciprocal Functions of Cantonal and Local Parties (local party presidents' views, as percentage of local parties considering this function important)

Functions	Radical Democrats (FDP)	Christian Democrats (CVP)	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	Social Democrats (SPS)
Of the cantonal party for its local party:				
Inform of national and cantonal issues	81	78	89	88
Support for local parties	68	74	63	70
Provision of ideological platform	64	70	68	78
Training and further education for local party's officials	60	69	61	74
Represent the local party's interest on higher political level	62	60	67	63
Encourage contact between the various local parties	48	54	45	53
Balance the different political tendencies within the party	36	41	37	31
Provide for possibility of political career	27	25	30	16
Of the local party for its cantonal party:				
Support the cantonal party during elections and referenda	85	88	90	91
Transmit the will of the grass roots of the party	77	80	77	80
Recruit new party members	73	71	85	80
Propose candidates for cantonal and national elections	69	64	70	62
Promote the political ideals and aims of the cantonal party within the community	42	49	45	56
Transmit the decision of the cantonal party to the grass roots of the party	39	46	43	49

ing voting campaigns and elections, followed by the transmission of the interests of the grass roots of the party and the recruitment of new party members. The latter function is considered especially important by the Swiss People's Party and the Social Democrats.

Even though the differences between parties in this survey are relatively small, they still reflect the nature of the four parties. In the two older parties, the Radical Democrats and the Christian Democrats, the relations between the local sections and their party are not as tight as for the Social Democrats or even the Swiss People's Party. For the two latter parties, especially for the Social Democrats, party organizations on the

two political levels have a relationship based on the principle of the division of labor. The higher level party works out, whenever possible with the participation of the grass roots of the party, a common platform, keeps its local sections informed, and trains the local party officials. The local parties' main concern is the recruitment of new party members. For the more loosely organized parties like the Radical Democrats and the Christian Democrats, this division of labor is less significant.

The tight network of local parties and the remarkable integration of the four main federal parties at the communal level is another, often forgotten, reason for the famous stability of the Swiss political system. Although new political groups have succeeded on several occasions in gaining an important share of the vote, most have never been able to develop a similar organizational structure at the communal level. Most were thus bound to disappear as the importance of their claims on the political agenda decreased.

In recent years, this has changed. There have been changes at the top of party organizations that have influenced their relationship with local parties in a negative way. Political parties have actually stopped being membership oriented mass parties with strong ties to their grassroots activists and sections (see Katz and Mair 1990, 25). They have become more and more like professionalized elite organizations with one primary goal, the maximization of votes. This has necessarily led to a rupture between the party leadership and local parties.

The strong influence of the mass media, with their own political rationality, indicates the same tendency. Political parties and their leaders have had to react quickly and professionally whenever they are confronted by new questions or problems and have had little time to consult the grass roots of their party. The mass media have also enabled political parties to promote their candidates in public and to make them popular in a short time, without them having to go through the usual rank-and-file career of party work. The lowest party level has thus lost its importance in recruiting political candidates, whereas party and public offices on the lowest level have lost their attractiveness.

These changes are intensified by the growing costs of party work and the fact that the share of membership fees as a percentage of total party income has decreased. Whether a party is financed by the state or by a private sponsor, in either case the party leadership gains autonomy from the grass roots of the party.

The loosening of the ties between the party leadership and its base has coincided with an alienation of citizens from the political parties. This evolution has occurred not only in the cities, where changing social values started to weaken the position of political parties years ago, but also in rural areas. As traditional patterns of living, in which party membership was almost inherited, have begun to disappear, parties have found

it increasingly difficult to recruit new members and have thus lost their strength. The party system and therefore also the political system as a whole has become less stable. In the years to come, there are good reasons to expect major political changes.

Notes

1. This net loss of 184 municipalities consists of 66 new registrations and 250 fusions (BFS 1992, xxiii).

2. The direct influence of the electoral system on the number of political parties can be shown empirically. In communities with a proportional system, there are generally more political parties organized than in communities with a majoritarian system (see Ladner 1991, 169ff.). This pattern is especially true for the smaller municipalities.

3. For the impact of the voting system on voter participation, see Ladner and Milner (forthcoming).

4. "Small size has both direct and indirect effects on the probability that consociational democracy will be established and will be successful: it directly enhances a spirit of cooperativeness and accommodation, and it indirectly increases the chances of consociational democracy by reducing the burdens of decision-making and thus rendering the country easier to govern" (Lijphart 1977, 65). Switzerland, Belgium, and Holland are examples of consociational democracy in Europe (see Lijphart 1977, 65).

5. Only about 16 percent of Swiss communities have a parliament (see Ladner 1991, 82). In the rest of the communities, citizens come together several times a year in a community meeting to decide on the political issues at stake.

6. As a result of the weak position of the federal party organizations and the important role of the cantonal parties, it is sometimes said that Switzerland does not have one but rather twenty-six different party systems, one for each canton (see Schumann 1971, 125).

7. The data used in this paper stem from three nationwide surveys carried out at the Institute of Sociology at Zurich University: a survey of communal secretaries in 1988 (see Ladner 1991), a survey of local party presidents in 1990 (see Geser et al. 1994), and another survey of communal secretaries in 1994.

8. In Western Germany in larger municipalities and rural cities, local parties also existed in the time before the municipal reform, but in the villages, the "party age" only started after the reform in the late 1960s (Schneider 1991, 157).

9. Some sections of the Radical Democrats say that they were founded between 1840 and 1850. At this point, however, they were most probably predecessor organizations in the form of reading and discussing circles.

10. This estimate is based on data from about 70 percent of the Swiss communities.

11. The information of the communal secretaries in this regard is not consistent. On the one hand, they report fewer parties in 1994 than in 1988. On the other hand, they report the foundation of about 750 new political groups and only 250 dissolutions. This is probably due to the fact that a party foundation is rarely

overlooked, whereas a party dissolution is a drawn-out process most people do not even notice.

12. Article 91 of the federal Constitution states for the members of the national parliament, for example, that they have to vote without instructions.

13. Engel (1990, 37) shows, for example, that party members in office are much more oriented toward the interest of their community than toward the interest of their party.

14. The result of Ayberk et al. (1991, 37) point in the same direction. The mid-level party elites of the Social Democrats consider themselves much more as representatives of their party sections than as midlevel elites of the right-wing parties.

15. About 40 percent of the majors in the French-speaking part of Switzerland also hold a party office (Schwab Christe 1995, 32).

16. The percentage of local party sections that are strongly influenced by the party program are as follows: Radical Democrats (FDP), 26 percent; Swiss People's Party (SVP), 29 percent; Christian Democrats (CVP), 36 percent; and Social Democrats (SP), 47 percent.

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