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POLITICAL PARTIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN FEDERAL COUNTRIES

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Preface

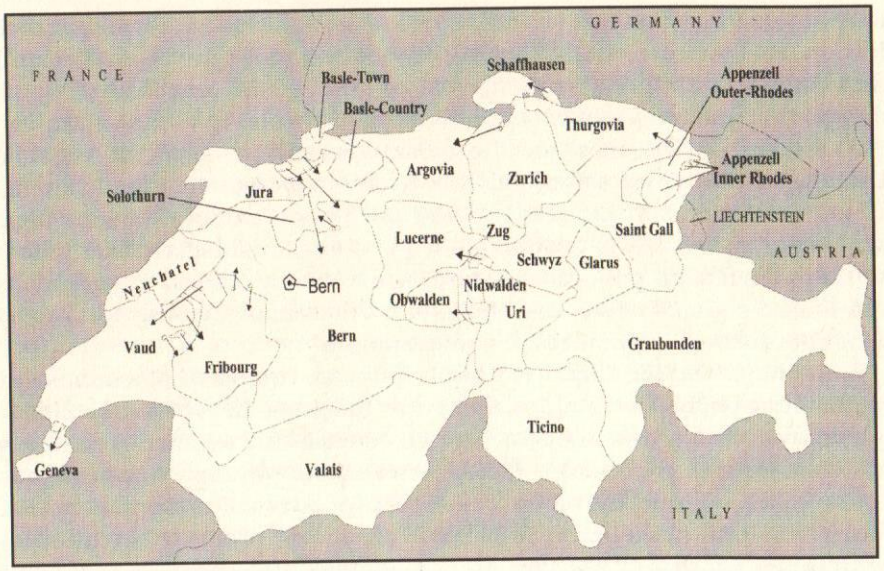
We are pleased to introduce this booklet on *Political Parties and Civil Society*, volume nine in the Global Dialogue Booklet series. This booklet offers a comparative overview of the subject across twelve federal systems, including: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, India, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. Each of these countries has something unique to bring to this important examination of a vital and basic element of democracy.

Over-all, what a reader might conclude from this Booklet is that the political party system of each federal country appears to have developed in its own distinct way, and indeed this in turn has had an impact in the federalization of these countries. The fact of a multi-level, federal system has significant implications for political parties, but there are also many other crucial historic and cultural factors.

And so, at one end of the spectrum we have the Belgian system, where all parties are, in essence, linguistic and regional; while, at the other end, there is the American system where, its two party system consisting of the Democrats and Republicans at levels of government. Between the two, there are countries such as Canada and India, where there is a mixture of national and regional/provincial parties at the sub-national and federal levels of government.

The Canadian case is interesting, and illustrative of how difficult it can often be for outsiders to penetrate the subtle, complex — and not always rational or logical — folkways of a country's party system.

In 1998, the erstwhile leader of Canada's federal Progressive Conservative Party took over the leadership of the Liberal Party of Quebec (ultimately getting elected Premier of that province). At the time, many foreign observers asked why the onetime Conservative had chosen to switch parties. The answer was that he had not, necessarily, given up being a *federal* Conservative. The Liberal Party of *Quebec* is a distinct entity from the Liberal Party of *Canada*, and one can be, simultaneously, a provincial Liberal and federal Conservative — as, indeed, many are. In Canada, this is not true of all parties, or all provinces, and you almost have to be part of the local political culture to appreciate those distinctions.



The Swiss party system: Party federalism and no language-based party organizations

ANDREAS LADNER / THOMAS MINGER

Swiss parties are politically far from homogenous. The cantonal parties play an important role and do not allow for a dominant party leadership at the national level, which weakens the influence of political parties. The federal structure of the party system, however, has been rather successful in preventing conflicts across denominational and linguistic borders. As well, the personalized and media-focused nature of politics make the cantonal parties significantly dependent on their national party organization. Their success in cantonal elections goes hand in hand with the performance of their national party.

On November 11, 2004 Swiss citizens took part in a popular vote on the reform of Swiss federalism. Prior to the vote, about one out of three cantonal party sections of the Social Democratic Party (SPS/PSS) and every fourth section of the Swiss People's Party did not follow their national party organization. The dissenting party sections of the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC) lost the vote while their national party organization was among the winners. At the same time, the dissenting sections of the Social Democrats won while their national party lost. The reform was broadly supported by the citizens. It resulted in a comfortable "yes"

majority of 64.4 per cent and opened the way for a more modern and vibrant federalism.

Openly expressed dissent within parties is by no means exceptional in Switzerland and has not necessarily been considered as a fundamental weakness. It is much more the product of a "federalist" party system that leaves considerable leeway to party organizations at lower levels. Sometimes, it is even seen as an asset. On some issues, and especially when regional interests are concerned, divergent opinions cannot be ignored. Party federalism prevents single parties from undertaking arduous fights to achieve common positions. It even offers their voters a broader choice. They can support the line of the national party or that of the dissenting cantonal party sections.

The Swiss party system and, to a lesser extent, the system of civil society organizations closely follows the territorial fragmentation of the country. A cantonal party consists of its local party organizations which in general also organize and administer party membership. The national party consists of its cantonal party organizations. The bigger parties dispose of cantonal party organizations in almost every canton.

All major parties include party organizations from the German, French and Italian speaking parts of the country. The parties must accommodate culturally divergent points of view internally. This has the effect of shielding national politics from quarrels among language groups.

In Switzerland there are — and this has been very beneficial for internal peace and stability — no language based party organizations, as there are, for example in Belgium. All major parties include party organizations from the German, French and Italian speaking parts of the country. The parties must accommodate culturally divergent points of view internally. This has the effect of shielding national politics from quarrels among language groups.

Very much like the 26 cantons in the Swiss political system, it is the cantonal party organizations that form the core of the parties, especially among the less centralized center and right of center parties, as well as among the Greens. The cantonal parties all together dispose of much greater financial resources than the national party organizations and they employ a larger portion of party staff. This privileged position of the cantonal sections is supported by the fact that there are — as in parliamentary systems with different electoral constituencies — no nationwide elections, since the voting districts are the cantons. Neither is there a direct election of the government, nor an indirect election of a president or a prime minister, as for example in Germany, where the parties have an official candidate for the office of the "Bundeskanzler" (Chancellor). The important consequence of this predominance of the cantonal level is weak national party organizations and a lack of national leadership. The role of leader of a national

party has to conciliate and manage a variety of political tendencies. Leaders are not elected for their political/ideological programs.

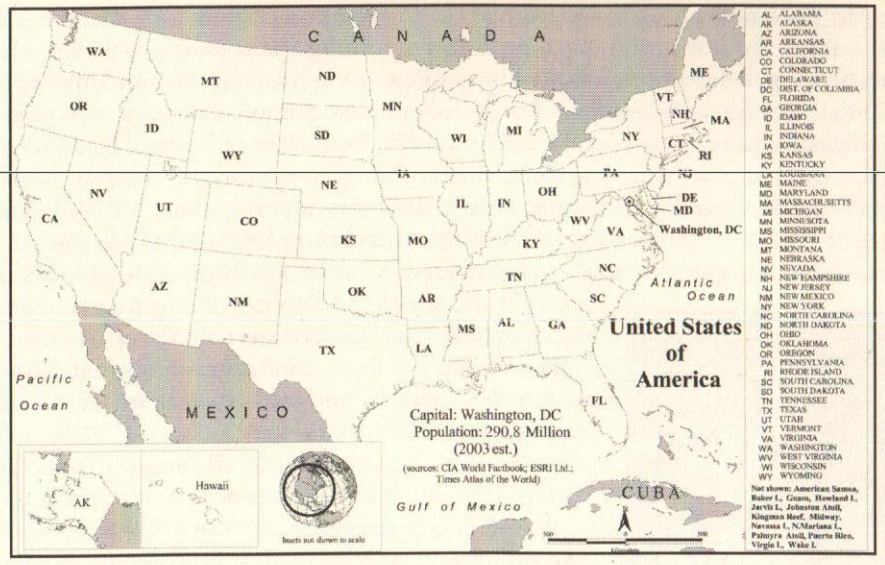
Since the constituent units of the federation enjoy a considerable amount of discretion in terms of public policies and tax rising powers, the cantonal party sections are at the heart of important political decisions. As well, reflecting the heterogeneity of the county which leads to considerable differences between cantons there are also considerable ideological differences among the cantonal sections of any single party.

The cantonal sections of the Social Democrats in the French speaking part of the country, for example, still have a more traditional, trade union orientation; whereas, in the German speaking part, they are more "modern", alternative or "New Labour" oriented. Similarly, the cantonal party sections of the Swiss liberal party (FDP.Die Liberalen/PLR.Les Libéraux-Radicaux), are more state oriented in the French speaking areas; whereas their counterparts in the German speaking part are more favourable to economic liberalization.

The national party organizations thus face an enormous amount of coordination work and often have difficulties in keeping all cantonal parties on a common track. Potential conflicts are alleviated by the Swiss federal principles of independence and separation of responsibilities. In 2003, when the Swiss People's Party wanted to expel Ms Widmer-Schlumpf, the national party had to expel the whole cantonal party section of Graubünden, where Widmer-Schlumpf was from.

However, there are also some more general factors that increase the pressure on the federal organization of the parties. The ongoing polarization of the Swiss party system, together with the media-focus and personalization of politics, calls for leadership and clear cut party positions. A national party leader has no time to consult the different cantonal parties when he has to defend the party line in a debate on TV; nor, on the other hand, can he make political statements that are not supported by cantonal parties.

Finally, the success of the cantonal parties even in cantonal elections depends more and more on the performance of the national parties. As a result of these new contingencies, it is inevitable that Switzerland will debate the idea of having more centralized party organizations.



Political Parties, Civil Society, and American Federalism.

GARY WEKKIN / JOE HOWARD

The ups and downs of the American federal experience commend the United States not as a model for would-be federations to imitate, but as a primer of valuable lessons about federal practice. The greatest of these lessons is that federalism, although imperfect, can endure over time, despite its internal contradictions.

Federalism is a bargain — the promise of unity amidst diversity — in order to enjoy the benefits of each, without sacrificing either. The challenge is to keep competing centripetal and centrifugal forces in balance. The accelerating pace of change across time continuously stresses the federal bargain by requiring constant adjustments in order to maintain equilibrium. The polar alternatives of unitary government or of "disunion" can seem invitingly simple in comparison.

For this reason, the historic oscillation of American federalism between a state-centered compact and an indestructible union illustrates that a "federal culture" — i.e., the sensitivity of civil society to changes of equilibrium between shared community and separate identities — and a flexible and adaptable federal arrangement are as essential to federalism as such basic structural elements as the constitutional division of powers. Without muscles and nerves to direct them, a skeleton is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for life.