

## 4.2 Political Parties

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## 1 Introduction

Switzerland is not a party State. The Swiss parties are generally considered to have a weak position in state and society (see, e.g., Rhinow 1986: 105, Longchamp 1994: 25, Rickenbacher 1995: 13, Ladner 1999a). It is usually pointed out that, for a long time, parties lacked formal recognition by the Constitution,<sup>1</sup> and that they are handicapped *vis-à-vis* interest groups and social movements as a consequence of the pre-parliamentary consultation procedure and direct democracy (Neidhart 1986). In the final third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the position of the parties was further weakened by changes in the process of how political opinions are formed. The party-independent media have largely replaced the party press, and in today's "media democracy" (Sarcinelle 1997), the dominant position of the party press has given way to a symbiotic relationship at best (Ladner 2005: 57f.). Further hardship threatens the parties in the form of the planned introduction of electronic elections. "Electoral aids" such as [www.smartvote.ch](http://www.smartvote.ch) put the candidates' party membership in the background, and the parties could lose their monopoly in the recruiting of political mandate holders (Ladner 2005: 70f.). But above all, significant signs for the weak position of the parties are found at the level of their organizations. These organizations are small, they do not command a professional party apparatus, and they have limited financial resources, as Switzerland does not have any public funding for parties. Lack of centralization and little party-internal homogeneity are also worth mentioning.

A range of characteristic properties of Switzerland and its political system can be cited as causes for the weak position of the parties: The *social and cultural heterogeneity*, the coexistence of four language groups and two religious denominations, and differences due to settlement patterns and economic structure present the parties with major integration tasks. The *smallness of the country* narrows the recruiting potential and further promotes the *Milizsystem*, an anchor of Swiss political culture, as the dominant organizational principle. Although the combination of roles across social and political subsystems has its advantages (Neidhart 1986: 42), a large part of the political work is done by amateur politicians in an unprofessional manner. The parties can offer their members only unpaid posts, which makes them less attractive since the possibilities of patronage are limited.

The pronounced federalism of the country and the autonomy of the municipalities further impede the formation of strong and centralized party organizations at national level. The structure of parties conforms to a political system with strongly subdivided constituencies. Correspondingly, we find district and ward parties, local parties comprising one or more municipalities, regional par-

ties, cantonal parties and national parties. The result is considerable complexity in a small area. At the millennium, 4.7 million voters had 14 nationally active parties, about 180 cantonal parties and around 5000 local parties to choose from.

Compared to the national parties, the cantonal parties play a more important role in Switzerland's political system (Fagagnini 1978; Hug 1994: 86; Neidhart 1986: 41; Seiler 1987: 119). Depending on the canton, the parties are integrated in diverse party systems and power constellations (Ladner 2003, 2004b). In addition, they are not anchored in the same population segments in each canton. It is therefore tempting to speak of not one but 26 different party systems in Switzerland. The national parties are faced with an enormous amount of coordination work and often have difficulties in keeping all cantonal parties on a common track. However, the decentralized party structure increases flexibility in dealing with local and regional conditions (Kriesi 1986: 337) and provides a broader range of identification. Party members can either identify with the national party or with a deviating cantonal party, according to their inclination.

The Swiss system of *direct democracy* originally contributed to the early development of political parties (Gruner 1977: 25ff.). Today, however, it is believed that direct democracy weakens the parties' position (Gruner 1984: 150), as financially stronger interest groups and social movements "outperform" them. The significance of elections is relatively slight in comparison, because voters always have the possibility to correct unpopular decisions of the party by ballot. On the other hand, more recent studies also show that parties are better organized in those cantons in which initiatives and optional referendums are frequently employed (Ladner/Brändle 1999). A larger number of direct democratic bills force parties continuously to be politically active, which can lead to a more professional organizational structure.

The *concordance system*, with its "magic formulae", engenders stability and guarantees parties a high level of security in terms of what they can expect. However, it also carries the "seduction" of "electoral modesty". Governments such as, for instance, the Federal Council between 1959 and 2003 are often composed according to an unchanging proportional representation. This goes hand in hand with the formation of cartels among the governing parties, and party competition is thus pushed into the background. It is mainly the large parties that profit from this system, while smaller parties are barred from access to the executive mandates. Linked to the concordance system is the *loyalty principle*, which requires the government representatives of the various parties to jointly make and defend important decisions. The loyalty principle makes it harder for individual parties to assume a clear political profile.

## 2 Origins and Development of the Swiss Parties

Precursors to the current Swiss political parties appeared in the first half of the 19th Century in the form of relatively unstructured political movements. These were usually based on shared ideas, and they centred on well-known politicians (Segesser 1996: 234).<sup>2</sup> The first parties (i.e., parties as understood by today's standards) emerged in those cantons that witnessed early and particularly fierce struggles for democratization, e.g., St.Gall, Basle-Country, Lucerne, Valais, Vaud and Berne (Gruner 1964: 275).

In 1888 there emerged the first party at national level, namely, the Social Democratic Party (SP). As a direct consequence, other groups began to tighten their organizations: the Radical Party (*Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei*, or "FDP") was founded in 1894 at national level and the Christian Democratic Party was established in 1912. In 1936, the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, "SVP") followed suit.<sup>3</sup> Intrinsic to the emergence of the party system in Switzerland were the *four cleavages* described by Lipset/Rokkan (1967). The Catholic conservatives opposed the liberals in the centre/periphery conflict as well as the state/church conflict. The centre/periphery controversy gave rise to the war of the *Sonderbund* (1847), while the dispute regarding church and state became manifest primarily in a cultural struggle (*Kulturkampf*). A third cleavage, i.e., between labour and capital, led to the emergence of the SP, and the country/city conflict eventually brought about the foundation of the SVP.

It is a characteristic feature of the Swiss parties that they emerged not from parliamentary factions or electoral committees but directly from the voting population itself (Gruner 1977: 25 ff.), or from citizens' associations that started out with petitions and requests and later initiated referendums and elections in the democratization process of many cantons. A further characteristic of Swiss parties is that they first formed organizations in the cantons and municipalities before merging into national party organizations at a relatively late stage. With reference to the history of their origins, the Swiss parties can be called "the children of popular rights" (*Kinder der Volksrechte*, Gruner 1977) as well as "the children of the cantons" (*Kinder der Kantone*, Vatter 2002). From the foundation of the federal State in 1848 until far into the 20th Century, Swiss politics was dominated by the *liberal movement*, an ideologically very heterogeneous Liberal Party that has become today's Radical Party (FDP).

A decisive factor in the stabilization of the Swiss system as a multi-party system was, on the one hand, the *introduction of proportional representation* at national level in 1919, which put an end to the hegemony of the liberals, and on the other hand the *gradual integration of the other parties into government responsibility*. In 1891, a representative of the CVP was for the first time elected to

join the *Federal Council*. In 1929, a farmers' representative joined him, as did a representative of the Social Democrats in 1943. In 1959, the so-called *magic formula* (*Zauberformel*) was established, according to which the four big parties were represented according to their shares of votes, with two seats (FDP, CVP, SP) or with one seat (SVP). Since 2003 there has been a change in the composition of the Bundesrat due to the SVP's massive gains in votes: two seats each for FDP, SVP and SP and one seat for the CVP.

Events such as the post-war economic growth phase, the cold war, the 1968 protest movements, the recession of the Seventies, the emergence of ecological issues, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European question, globalization and the economic crisis of the Nineties seemed to have little effect on the Swiss party system. The proportions of voters supporting the four largest parties did not change significantly between 1919 and 1995, or, more tellingly, between 1945 and 1995 (see figure 1 below). It was only in the middle of the Nineties that unusual voter migrations started to take place. An attempt to divide the development of the national party system into characteristic periods in spite of its relatively strong stability leads to the postulation of five post-WWII phases as regards the dynamics of party competition and shifting votes:

*The Fifties until the beginning of the Sixties:* a phase of stabilization during which shares of votes for the four governing parties remained constant and polarization of the party system was slight. Concordance was established at the federal level and was underlined by the introduction of the magic formula in 1959.

*The mid-Sixties until the beginning of the Seventies:* the party system was becoming agitated. The three bourgeois governing parties, headed by the CVP, moved closer to the centre. Looking at the whole party system, a re-ideologization and polarization can be detected. The concordance system was being discussed. The social-liberal Independent Party (*Landesring der Unabhängigen*, "LdU"), which was in opposition, and the two right-wing parties, National Action (*Nationale Aktion*, "NA") and the Republicans, gained a few seats at the expense of the three big government parties. The concerns of the 1968 protest movements became noticeable within the parties. The parties reconsidered their organizational structures in line with the participational needs of the younger generation. An "extraparliamentary opposition" emerged to the left of the SP, and various small parties of the left sprang up (Maoists, Revolutionary Marxist League, Progressive Organisations Switzerland, Partito Socialista Autonomo).

*The mid-Seventies until the beginning of the Eighties:* the economic crisis slowed down the dynamics of the late Sixties. The polarization of the party system decreased slightly. The position of the governing parties was consolidated. After the shift to the left in the elections of 1975, the liberals regained

their prime position for the first time since the Twenties with their slogan “More freedom and personal responsibility – less state”.

*The mid-Eighties until the beginning of the Nineties:* environmental issues increasingly made their mark on politics. The Green Party of Switzerland (“GPS”) and the Automobile Party (later the Freedom Party of Switzerland, “FPS”), which was created as a reaction to the Green Party, created trouble for the government parties. The share of votes for the four government parties (FDP, CVP, SP und SVP) dropped to below 70% for the first time since 1991. The extreme left was weakened. At first, a green-alternative alliance was formed, and later the extreme left gravitated towards the GPS or the SP. The SP began to pursue a more pragmatic policy.

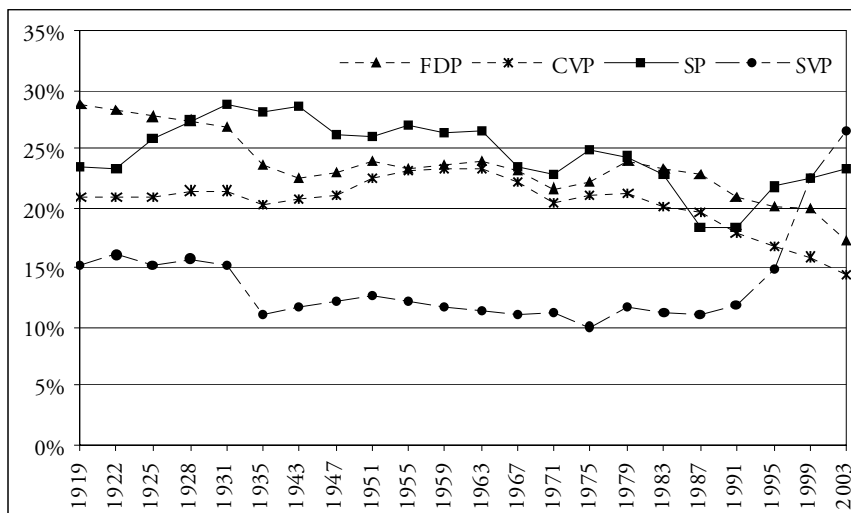
*Since the beginning of the Nineties:* The SVP has followed a clear and successful right-wing course under the influence of national MP (*Nationalrat*) Christoph Blocher and his defensive attitude toward Europe. Under the direction of Peter Bodenmann (party president from 1990 to 1997), the SP has succeeded in distinguishing itself as the sole force in the left-wing and ecological spectrum. The small right-wing parties have lost their importance, as have the LdU and the Green Party. A polarization of the party system is caused no longer by the extremely small parties but by the two big poles, SVP and SP. The situation of the FDP is less than satisfactory: since the fall of the Berlin Wall there has been a lack of an enemy, and the changing conditions have not given rise to new liberal proposals for the future. The CVP has become the weakest of the four government parties due to the effects of long-standing structural problems – large social heterogeneity, tensions between conservatives and economic circles and Christian-Social elements, a historically conditioned fixation on Catholics, and unrelenting secularization. At the end of the Nineties the SVP, having become the strongest party, launched the fight for hegemony in the bourgeois camp and began to influence the course of the other parties. The SVP demanded a second seat in the Federal Council and received it in 2003 at the expense of the CVP. The seat was occupied by the SVP’s uncontested leader, Christoph Blocher. The Green Party was successful in the elections for the National Council (*Nationalratswahlen*) in 2003.

In this last phase, the cantonal party systems have become closer to the national pattern due to the success of the SVP, and in particular due to its intrusion into the votership of the CVP and to support from voters in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. In the Catholic cantons, the CVP used to be the absolutely dominant party, leaving space only for a clearly weak FDP (Obwalden, Nidwalden) and for a not particularly strong SP (Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Zug, Valais). In the cantons of Geneva, Vaud and Neuchâtel, it was traditionally the Liberal Party (LSP) which helped shape the politics of the bourgeois

camp, and for a long time the SVP could get no foothold. Since the mid-Nineties, the SVP has been gaining considerable ground in these cantons too.

This development has been referred to in the literature as the “nationalization” of the party system. Work by Caramani (2004) and Armingeon (2003) shows that political patterns in Switzerland until very recently had a strong local and regional character, more so than in other western European democracies. Looking at the distribution of party organizations, it becomes clear that only since the end of the Eighties has the SVP succeeded in establishing cantonal parties in central Switzerland and the cantons of Geneva, Valais and Neuchâtel (Ladner 2004a: 343 ff.). Furthermore, the electoral success of this party in the cantonal and national elections (Ladner 2003, Bundesamt für Statistik 2003) proves that the contrast between the results in the cantons and at national level has diminished. Finally, the work of Kriesi *et al.* (2005: 265) demonstrates that the electoral behaviour of citizens in the various cantons has become more uniform in structure, not least because of the charismatic role of Christoph Blocher.

Figure 1: Percentage of electoral shares of the four government parties, 1919–2003



Source: Bundesamt für Statistik 2005.

Yet it cannot be assumed that the general Swiss model will be applied to all cantons. The CVP has lost importance in the Protestant cantons as well as in cantons with mixed denomination, where it has little representation and lags behind the Green Party and others. On the other hand, in the catholic cantons

the party remains, despite its losses, ahead of all the other parties. The cantonal party systems are nevertheless becoming more uniform with respect to the number of parties – as will be shown below – and partly also with respect to volatility. As regards the strength of the parties, a convergence towards the national party system can only partly be assumed (Ladner 2004b: 16ff.).

### 3 The Party System: Fragmentation and Stability

The Swiss example shows that high *fragmentation* of the party system does not necessarily go hand in hand with political instability.<sup>4</sup> The “effective number of parties” index by Laakso/Taagepera (1979) shows that the Swiss party system is one of the most fragmented. The average figure for Switzerland in the time between 1948 and 1995 is 5.9. Germany, the UK, Austria and Malta as well as Australia, New Zealand and the USA show figures of below 3.0 for the same time period. The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Finland and Switzerland show figures above 5.0. Only Belgium, since the beginning of the Eighties, has had a higher figure than Switzerland.<sup>5</sup>

The post-WWII period is characterized by an initial increase in party numbers in Switzerland, as in other countries (Ladner 2004a: 74), which began in the mid-Sixties and was followed by a decrease in the Seventies and then another increase in the Eighties (see figure 2 below). Particularly striking in the Swiss case is the relatively strong increase in parties before the Second World War. Switzerland deviates from international developments in a *marked decrease in parties since the 1991 elections to the National Council*, which is due to the disappearance of smaller parties and the gains of both SVP and SP.

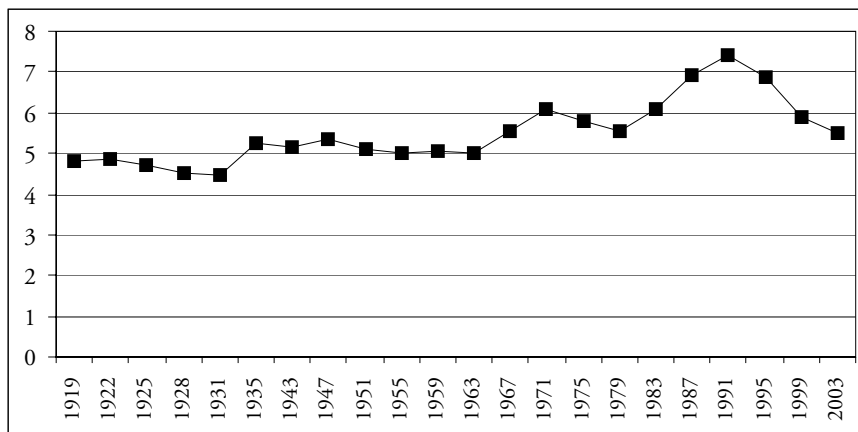
Looking at the cantonal party systems, it can be seen that the effective number of parties has gone down since the beginning of the Nineties in the strongly fragmented cantons of Zurich, Basle-City, Basle-Country, Aargovie, Thurgovie and Geneva, while it has gone up somewhat in the slightly fragmented cantons (Ladner 2003: 11 f.). In this respect, at least, a certain convergence of the cantonal party systems can be detected (see figure 3 below).

The effective number of parties only partially captures the transformation of the party system. Significant shifts in votes do not necessarily find expression in the number of parties, as is the case when two parties “swap” their voter shares. In such cases, volatility is a better indicator.

The stability of political systems is usually measured by means of Pedersen’s (1979) concept of *aggregated volatility*. This figure measures the shift of voter shares between two elections (see figure 3). For virtually all European countries it can be shown that the Second World War upset the balance of the party system. The voters needed to find their bearings following that conflict, which led

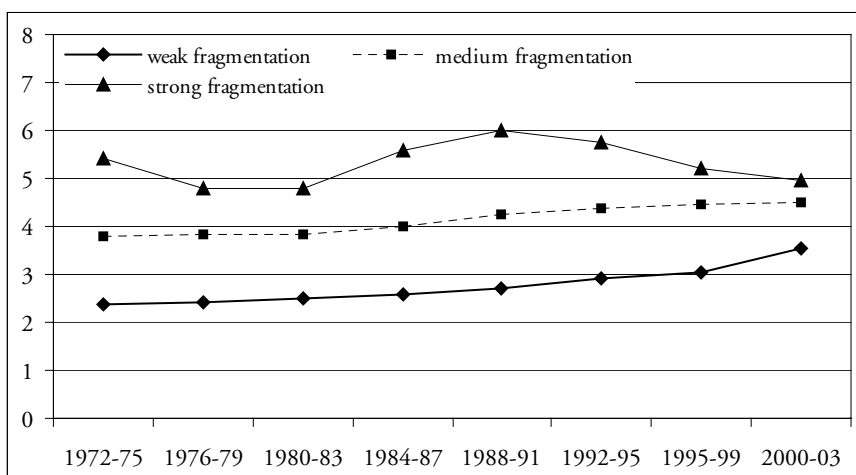


Figure 2: Effective number of parties at national level



Source: Bundesamt für Statistik 2005; author's calculations.

Figure 3: Development of fragmentation in cantons with low, medium and high fragmentation at the beginning of the Seventies



The cantons were grouped as follows according to fragmentation in the electoral period 1972–75:

Weak fragmentation (2.9): LU, UR, SZ, OW, NW, ZG, VS.

Medium fragmentation (3-4.9): BE, GL, FR, SO, SH, SG, GR, TI, VD, NE, JU.

Strong fragmentation (5-): ZH, BS, BL, AG, TG, GE.

Source: Ladner (2003: 13).

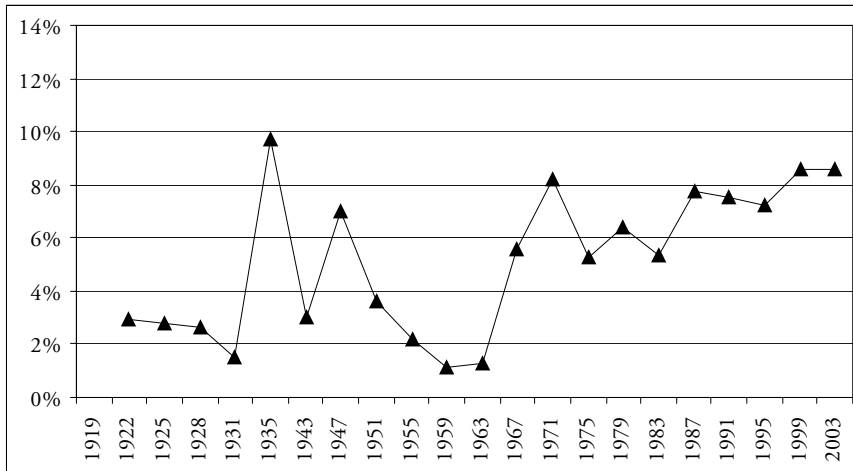
to high volatility (Lane/Ersson 1994: 189). By contrast, the Fifties were characterized by more solid party ties. In the late Sixties, volatility rose again, and ever since, phases of strong shifts of voter shares have alternated with phases of slight shifts.

These figures refute the notion that political conditions have become more unstable in recent times. It is true that they have become unstable compared to the “calm” Fifties, which gave rise to the magic formula, but they are not unstable compared to elections before and after World War II.<sup>6</sup> The average figure of volatility in Switzerland is 5.4 for the period since 1945. Other countries with low volatility are Austria, Sweden and the UK. Countries with high volatility are the “new democracies” of Greece, Spain and Portugal, as well as France and Denmark.

In the second half of the Sixties, the Swiss party system became agitated. NA and Republicans, LdU and the parties of the extreme left profited from a general concern about immigration, the crisis of confidence in the political leadership, and the demands of the 1968 movements. The onset of the economic crisis in the Seventies stabilized this situation until the emergence of the Green Party and the Automobile Party, which led to renewed turbulence. Until the mid-Nineties, volatility remained stable at a slightly higher level, and since 1999 it has risen to a little more than 8%. A large majority of cantons also show increasing volatility; hence, the revival of party competition may well be due to structural reasons (see figure 4).

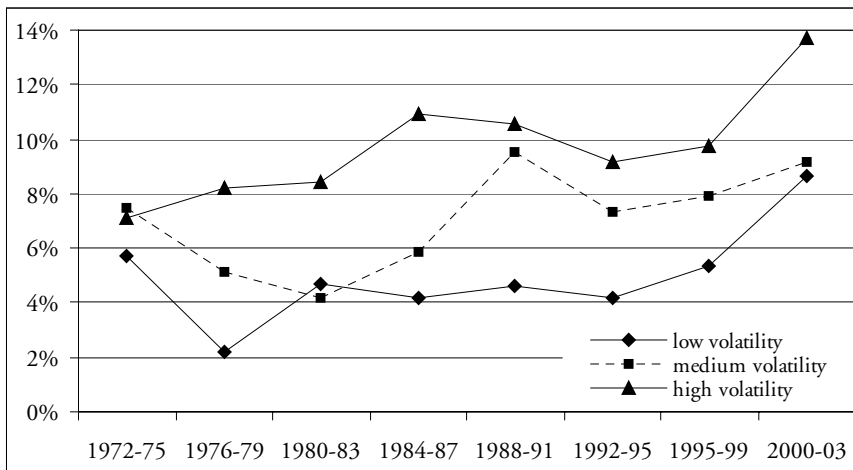
However, the “volatility” indicator is not always sufficiently sensitive to capture all changes in the party system. From the mid-Nineties onwards, the emergence of the SVP triggered changes which were more substantial than in earlier phases, and figure 4 does not do them justice. The reason is that, while continuous moderate gains across several elections do not increase volatility, they can lead to a general change of the party system. Somehow contradictory, it also has to be said that the results of the elections to the National Council (*Nationalrat*) are only partly an indicator of political instability. The Senate, an equal partner in Parliament, shows less reaction to changes in the electorate’s political preferences.

Figure 4: Percentage of volatility in the Swiss party system



Source: Bundesamt für Statistik 2005; author's calculations.

Figure 5: Development of volatility in cantons with low, medium and high average volatility



The cantons were grouped as follows according to average volatility between 1972–2003.

Low volatility (<6.0%): UR, FR, GR, VS, JU.

Medium volatility (6.1-8.0%): LU, SZ, OW, GL, ZG, SO, TG, TI, VD, NE.

High volatility (8.1%-): ZH, BE, NW, BS, BL, SH, SG, AG, GE.

Source: Ladner (2003: 16).

#### 4 The Changing Parties

There is unanimity in the literature that change in a party can only be comprehended by examining the party's internal make-up. Two fundamental questions arise, which are not entirely independent of each other: on the one hand, there is the question of how a political party is organized; on the other hand are the questions of which political aims the party pursues and how it is positioned in the political struggle.

For Duverger, *mass membership parties* constitute the ideal organizational form (Ware 1996: 96), but more recently *countermodels* have been proposed in the form of Kirchheimer's (1965) "catch-all party", Panebianco's (1988) "professional electoral party" and Katz/Mair's (1995) "cartel party". In these countermodels, voters become more important than party members and the party organization is more professional, while party ideology may lose some of its significance

In the 1970s, the Swiss parties tried to adjust their organizations to changing circumstances (Ladner 2002: 238). At the centre of these adjustments, and corresponding to Kirchheimer, were people's parties, the opening of parties to wider segments of the population, a professionalization and centralization of party organizations and – against the background of a widespread lack of confidence in the political establishment – the extension of party-internal democracy.

As for *professionalization*, parties in the medium-sized and larger cantons began to staff their administrative offices with full-time employees from the mid-1970s onwards. (Fagagnini 1978: 91). A study of cantonal parties at the end of the 1990s shows that the cantonal parties have around 90 full-time posts (Ladner/Brändle 2001: 206). Added to the approximately 50 posts of the national party organizations, this amounts to a total of 140 to 150 posts. Since the 1970s, the number of full-time employees has thus doubled.

Compared with the development in other countries (Mair 1994: 5), the increase in professionalization is below average. Only the UK and The Netherlands have lower rates of increase, but in absolute terms these two countries have a higher level of professionalization. Moreover, it can be assumed that Swiss professionalization concerns above all the administrative apparatus of the parties, so that the degree of professionalization of the parties' purely political activities is even lower. According to information provided by the parties themselves, about 72% of the cantonal parties have increased their level of professionalization in their administrative tasks, and 60% of the parties have done so in their political tasks in the past 10 years. It is striking that especially the two most successful parties, SP and SVP, claim to have raised the degree of professionalization in their political activities (Ladner/Brändle 2001: 211).

The conclusion, reached by Fagagnini in the mid-1970s, that the party organizations in Switzerland are based on the *Milizsystem* (Fagagnini 1978: 91) is still valid today. The number of individuals who are professionally involved in politics remains very small, especially if one bears in mind that the 150 full-time posts are spread across national as well as numerous cantonal party organizations.

With respect to *financial resources*, the situation is similar to that of professionalization: the parties on the whole are in charge of a larger budget which is however spread out across many different parties and diverse political levels. In the latter half of the 1990s, the parties were, by their own account, in charge of budgets of CHF 40.5 to 44 million in an average non-election year and of CHF 64.5 to 74 million in an average election year (Ladner/Brändle 2001: 169). The largest budget was commanded by the totality of the cantonal parties. These figures have likely remained much the same in recent years, so it can be assumed that the governing parties are each in charge of an annual budget of CHF 2 to 3.5 million. These figures are modest in comparison with other countries.

The quoted figures do not include contributions to electoral or voting campaigns which bypass the party budget. The budgets of many committees for voting and election campaigns, as well as those for certain special projects (such as the annual Albisgüetli conference of the SVP), are not subject to the regular party coffers.

The fact that Switzerland still lacks state funding for parties constitutes an important argument against Katz/Mair's (1995) "cartel party" model for the Swiss parties. The still modest professionalization at least partly argues against Panebianco's (1988) model of professional-electoral parties. What about Kirchheimer's (1965) prediction that parties would increasingly get rid of their ideological components and converge in an attempt to gain as many votes as possible?

The positioning of the parties on a left-to-right axis suggests that political differences have not become smaller in recent years, and that we cannot assume a centripetal party competition. In two nationwide surveys, 2,500 local party presidents were asked to rate their local party and their national party on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 1 represented the far left and 10 represented the far right). The results show that, in the 14 years from 1990 to 2003, the SVP's national party underwent a relatively strong shift to the right while the SP's national party experienced a slightly weaker shift to the left. CVP and especially FDP moved towards the middle, at least at national level. By contrast, the results for the local parties show that the changes at local level were less marked. In other words, the much talked-about polarization of recent years can be attributed to the SVP's oppositional politics in the national arena.

Calculations of the positioning and polarization of the Swiss party system based on the surveys carried out in 1990 and 2003 show that, on the whole, the party system has moved slightly to the left (from 5.87 to 5.57 on a scale of 1 to 10) and that polarization has increased (from 3.8 to 4.6).<sup>7</sup> Kirchheimer's prediction thus cannot be confirmed: the parties are not becoming more alike. Indeed, there are still marked and partly growing differences in terms of positioning. There has been further confirmation of this trend by means of examining the parties' attitudes to political issues (Ladner/Brändle 2001: 286 ff.; Kriesi *et al.* (forthcoming)).

*Table 1: The left-right positioning of Swiss parties (local parties and national parties) as judged by the presidents of local parties*

	Local parties		National parties			N 1990	N 2004	
	1990	2004	1990-2004	1990	2004	1990-2004	LP/NP	
FDP	6.9	6.8	-0.1	7.5	6.8	-0.7	631/616	555/550
CVP	6.3	6.4	0.1	6.1	5.9	-0.2	554/549	454/453
SVP	7.0	7.2	0.2	7.2	7.9	0.7	277/277	410/401
SP	3.3	3.1	-0.2	3.2	2.9	-0.3	559/560	553/552
GPS	3.3	2.4	-0.9	3.7	2.5	-1.2	33/32	73/73
EVP	5.5	5.0	-0.5	5.3	4.9	-0.5	77/75	80/81
LPS	8.0	8.0	0.0	8.3	8.2	-0.1	52/51	58/55

Source: Surveys of local parties 1990 and 2004 (Geser *et al.* 1994 and 2004); author's calculations.

Looking back at the aims pursued by Swiss parties in the 1970s it can be seen that many have not been realized. The cantonal parties of the bourgeois parties in particular have not moved closer together. There are still struggles and deviations in voting slogans in the periphery. Neither CVP nor FDP have introduced the membership principle which was on the agenda at the time. The professionalization of party tasks is still very limited. As far as party-internal democracy is concerned, there was even an "operative backlash" in the 1990s. The increasing influence of strategic calculations, event management and the new role of the media in politics have led to a situation in which leading politicians can move and talk relatively independently of their party base. In addition, the participatory needs of the base have become reduced, if anything, in the wake of the changing significance of politics. The presidents of the cantonal parties confirm this conclusion. About 60% give priority to operative freedom of party leaders over participation and co-decision of the base. Especially among the SP's cantonal parties, there has been a shift of emphasis in recent years (Ladner/Brändle 2001: 257). A similar development can also be observed at the level of local parties (Geser *et al.* 2003).

## 5 Anchoring in the Population

A further characteristic of the new party types is a turning away from their original base and a stronger orientation towards voters. It is unclear to what extent this development was encouraged by the parties themselves and to what extent it is the result of social change. Indicators which measure acceptance and anchoring of parties among the population are factors such as participation in votes and elections, confidence in the parties, identification with a particular party, and, from the point of view of the parties, the possibility of recruiting members and role-bearers for party-internal and public mandates as well as the parties' access to the most important political posts.

*Participation in votes and elections* has been decreasing continuously since the mid-20th Century. After the Second World War, participation was above 70%, but in the years since 1979 it has levelled off to between 40% and 50%. The average participation in votes, which used to be up to 10% below participation in elections, has since the mid-1980s come close to the latter. Compared to other western democracies, Switzerland, together with the USA, belongs to the countries with the lowest participation in national elections, although almost everywhere else participation is on a downward trend (Gray/Caul 2000). One reason for low participation may be the strain placed on voters in a direct democracy where government decisions can be reversed by voting. Another reason may be the low significance of a vote in a concordance democracy tending towards cartelization.

Higher participation may be desirable for reasons of democracy. But it cannot be taken for granted that it would produce different political decisions and a different party composition. The political *sympathies of non-voters* are distributed much like those of voters, with a slight plus for the Right (also Lutz 2003: 84). My own analyses of non-voters in the national elections of 1999 show less sympathy with the parties of the middle and the moderate bourgeois and slightly more support for the two extreme poles: the Left would have received about a third of the non-voters' votes, while a little more than 35% would have voted for the Right.

*Confidence in political parties* is slight compared to other social and political institutions, and if anything it has lessened in recent years (GFS 2003). *Identification with a party* has also lessened among the citizens. In the Seventies, more than 50% of eligible voters identified with a government party, whereas in 2003 this figure was little more than 40% (Kriesi *et al.* 2005: 261). In the Nineties, roughly half of all eligible voters maintained that they had no particular sympathy for any one party (Longchamp 1994: 21.). It is striking that the loss in party loyalty has happened mainly in the political middle. Directly concerned and

threatened are CVP and FDP. Party identification with the SVP has increased, if anything, and for the SP no clear can be seen (Kriesi *et al.* 2005: 262). However, it can also be shown that those people who today identify with a party show more readiness to vote for this party. People with no ties to any party are distributed unevenly. They are strongly represented among people with little education, younger people and women, as well as in the west of Switzerland, which is more strongly oriented towards representational democracy (Suter 2000: 198). However, in virtually all groups it can be shown that the percentage of party independence increased in the Eighties and Nineties.<sup>8</sup>

A further indicator determining the anchoring of parties in the population are the *parties' membership figures*. Unfortunately, not much reliable data are available in Switzerland, which is due to the fact that, among the FDP and CVP, the membership principle was implemented rather late and incompletely. It was only in the Seventies that FDP and CVP began to organize themselves more strongly on the basis of registered members, and in the Nineties both parties were still making efforts along the same lines. Our surveys of local parties not only show the extent of the missing implementation of the membership principle, they also suggest that in recent years there have been no changes in this respect: in 1990, with respect to the local sections and their implementation of a formalized membership, the figure is little more than 40% for the CVP, barely 60% for the FDP, 75% for the SVP and more than 80% for the SP (Geser *et al.* 1994: 141). In 2003, the result for the CVP was 45%, still 60% for the FDP and 87% for the SP, while for the SVP it had decreased to 70%. This decrease is probably due to the emergence of numerous new local sections, in which no clear distinction is made between members and supporters. In the case of the SP, it is surprising that not all local parties make such a distinction, as the membership principle is prescribed by statute. It can therefore be assumed that the information from several local parties reflects reality rather than party statutes.

If an attempt at determining the *number of party members* is made regardless, estimates and projections have to be relied on. Gruner assumes 38% of party members among the electorate for the years 1963–1967. According to him, this percentage dropped by half as a result of the introduction of women's right to vote. Given the number of eligible voters, party members made up about 11% in the Seventies (Gruner 1977: 218), which corresponds to roughly 390,000 party members. An international comparison suggests that the Swiss parties had a high degree of organization.

Given the information provided by the parties, the mid-Nineties, just like the mid-Seventies, show roughly 400,000 party members, 150,000 of which are members of the FDP. Taking into account that in the intervening 20 years the number of eligible voters rose by more than 900,000, a decrease in party mem-



bership can be observed. Such a decrease has been confirmed by surveys. According to the investigations of Longchamp (1994: 22), the share of party members among eligible voters dropped from 18% to 12% in the years from 1983 to 1994.<sup>9</sup>

In reality, the percentage of party members is probably overstated. If a *restrictive definition of membership* is employed, which replaces the more comprehensive notion of “sympathizer/supporter” wherever this was used because of an absent membership principle, the resulting percentage of party members compared to eligible voters is as low as 7%. Hence, the Swiss parties had only about 300,000 members in 1997. Compared to other countries, Switzerland takes an average position. In Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and France, the parties have distinctly fewer members, whereas in Austria they clearly have more (Katz/Mair 1992: 334; Mair/van Biezen 2001).

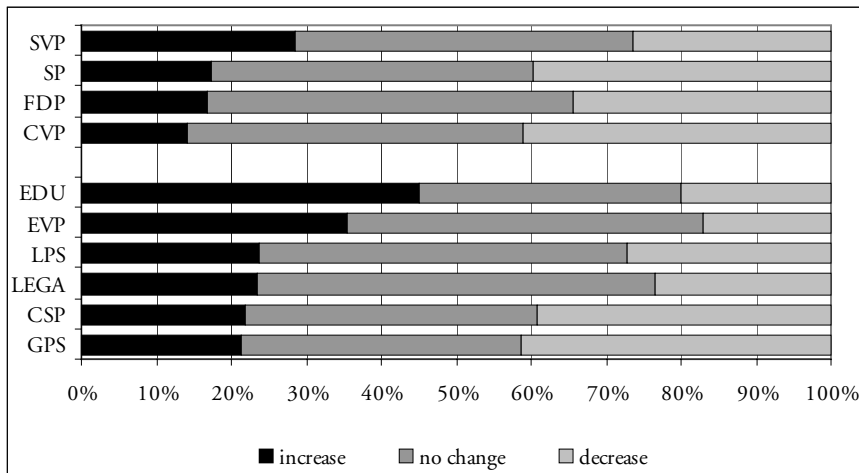
The FDP is the party with the largest membership no matter which way members are calculated, as it boasts about 90,000 members. CVP (74,000) and SVP (59,000) follow, while the SP, with about 40,000 members, is lagging behind the other government parties. It has to be said that the SP is more selective in the choice of its members and demands more of a financial and personal commitment.

On the basis of the two surveys among local parties, the changes in membership figures between 1990 and 2003 can plausibly be projected. The government parties jointly lost a fifth of their members between 1990 and 2003. Particularly severe were the losses of FDP and CVP (more than a quarter), whereas losses were less significant for the SVP and SP (a little less than 15%), who were more successful in the recent elections. Gains in electoral votes do not necessarily go hand in hand with increasing membership figures.

The success and future prospects of a party do not solely depend on its membership figures. The decrease in members might suggest that parties with stronger voter orientation have found a more successful organizational principle. However, if members are lacking, the parties need to rely more on committed activists or professional party employees. The former are particularly important in a *Miliz country* like Switzerland, as the parties have only few full-time party staff at their disposal (Ladner 2001: 134ff.) and there is no state funding available.

The most recent trends show a rather grim picture, at least at the level of the local parties (see figure 6). A third of local sections have lost activists, whereas only a fifth have gained any activists. The trends parallel those of supporters and members, and a shortage of men becomes apparent. In almost 40% of parties, the number of male activists has dropped. In terms of supporters as well as activists, the parties of smaller municipalities report the biggest losses, but larger municipalities also report a decrease in activists.

Figure 6: Change in numbers of activists, according to party\*



\* Percentage of local party of the corresponding party in which the number of activists has increased, decreased or remained stable.

Nmin = 17 (LEGA), Nmax = 561 (FDP)

LEGA: Lega dei Ticinesi, right-wing populist party in the canton of Ticino; EDU: Eidgenössisch-Demokratische Union

Source: Geser *et al.* 2003: 10.

The significance of the parties' anchoring in the population must not be underestimated, whether in the form of members or loyal voters. Traditionally, the parties have their base in the Swiss municipalities. In general, it is not possible to join a national party directly; instead, membership begins in the local section of one's place of residence. This is where a party applicant is accepted or turned down, although acceptance is a formality for most parties, with the exception of the SP. Despite an increase in the tendency to deviate from the norm, a typical career in politics still begins at the very bottom with a post at local level. The difficulties of the parties in finding suitable candidates for the numerous political mandates in the municipalities, together with a partial loss of status, may lead to an impairment of political stability (Ladner 1996, 1999b).

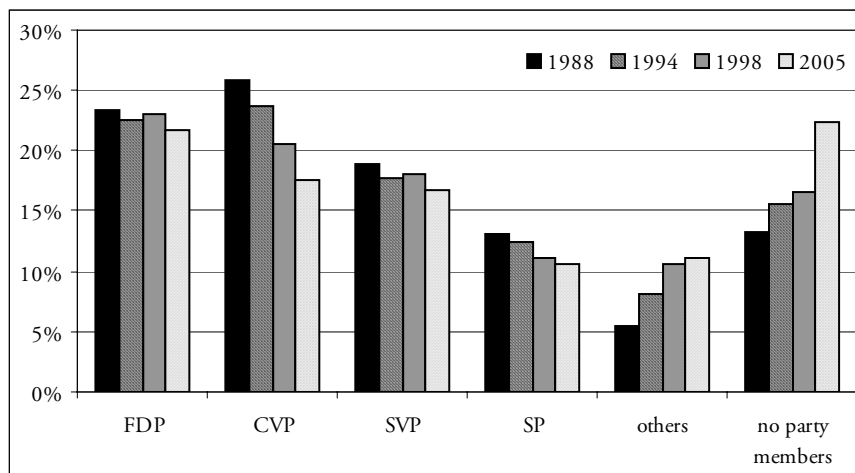
The theory of erosion receives substantial support from the decrease in *representation of local parties in the municipal executive*. The majority of the 16,250 executive seats in the municipalities are still filled by party members, as evidenced by surveys among communal clerks (Ladner 1991, Geser *et al.* 1996, Ladner *et al.* 2000). The percentage of party members in the executive rises as the size of the municipality increases (Ladner 1991). In the past 10 to 15 years, the representation of parties in the municipal executive has diminished. In the mu-

municipalities in which this development can be traced, the share of party representatives in the municipal executive declined from 87% in 1988 to 78% in 2005.

It can further be noted that all four government parties have a smaller share of seats in 2005 than in 1988 (see figure 7).<sup>10</sup> This observation is particularly interesting in the case of the SVP, which in the last few years has been very successful in (parliamentary) elections at cantonal and national level. The only deviation from the general trend is due to the FDP, which had very slight gains of seats between 1994 and 1998. The big winners in the municipal executives are “other parties” and independent politicians.

From the point of view of the parties, it may be reassuring that the “erosion of local parties” is happening in very small municipalities, particularly by international standards, which anyhow accommodate only a tiny part of the population. In the cities, the parties still play a bigger role. The question arises as to whether a dual development is under way, in which the party model in the cities is complemented by a political model of independent politicians in small municipalities, or whether indeed the small municipalities are setting a new trend which will lead to a loss of status for parties in larger municipalities too. Whatever the situation, it can be assumed that the relationships between parties and the electorate have lost their stability in Switzerland.

Figure 7: The government parties' shares of seats in the municipal executives



Source: Survey among communal clerks 1988 (Ladner 1991), survey among communal clerks 1994 (Geser *et al.* 1996), survey among communal clerks 1998 (Ladner *et al.* 2000), survey among communal clerks 2004 (Ladner/Steiner/Geser 2005); author's calculations on the basis of a little more than a quarter of the municipal executive seats (i.e., all municipalities that provided complete data on the composition of their executives in all four surveys).

## 6 The Swiss Party System in Motion

For a long time, the Swiss party system was regarded as the epitome of political stability. Shifts in votes in the region of a few percentage points were described as landslide wins or losses. In the 1990s, this changed radically. Within ten years, the SVP grew from a ten-percent party to the strongest party in the country. The principle of division of power which is inherent in the Swiss political system prevents the SVP from becoming a dominant force, but the party's successes have strengthened the liberal/bourgeois camp and will leave permanent traces in the party system. The two traditional parties, CVP and FDP, have come under particular pressure. In 2003 they scored their worst results in the elections to the national Parliament since 1919, and their voter shares have been decreasing for more than 20 years. This suggests that their problems are independent of economic factors and cannot be resolved with small programmatic corrections or a more efficient party organization and better publicity. For the FDP, the question arises as to whether they are about to share the fate of liberal parties in other countries and be demoted from a dominant, established party to a potential coalition partner. As concerns the CVP, it is possible that the brackets formed by the catholic denomination are about to be broken up permanently. Conservative forces are just as at home in the SVP as they are in the CVP, and the Christian socialists could find a new home on the Left or as an ethical niche party. What looks at first sight like a temporary fluctuation or a partial change – to use Gordon Smith's (1989) terminology – may indeed amount to a general change or even a transformation of the Swiss party system.

The usual indicators of comparative party research are only partly suited to capturing the change of party systems in good time. Fragmentation and volatility, polarization and strength of the different camps say little about what is happening in the parties themselves. Already in the Seventies and Eighties, certain developments were set in motion in those parties which are successful today, and these developments are not reflected in the measurements employed. The SP today has a completely different set of supporters compared to a few decades ago. A larger segment of supporters are highly educated and at home in the same income classes as those of the FDP (Hirter 2000: 21). Voters for the SP are no longer predominantly workers and employees. The SVP has also changed. The former Farmers', Trade and Citizens' party has turned into a people's party that is clearly located on the Right, after a short and unsuccessful excursion into the middle.

This answers the question of the "frozen party system" (Lipset/Rokkan 1967). Even if the Swiss party system, with its four main protagonists, FDP, CVP, SVP and SP, at first sight looks like evidence for the continued existence

of the four historical cleavages which dominate the emergence of party systems, this assessment does not stand up to closer scrutiny. If cleavages are used in the sense of Bartolini/Mair (1990), and if it is assumed that besides an organization there has to be a structural base and an appropriate awareness, it can be said that the structural anchoring of Swiss parties is not what it used to be. Quite possibly, ideological rather than sociological criteria are at work in structuring today's party systems.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In legal terms, the Swiss parties are organized as associations (Vereine), according to Articles 60–79 of the Civil Code (ZBG). Their purpose, means and internal organization are laid down in their statutes. There is no party law in Switzerland, and until recently parties were not even mentioned in the Constitution (in contrast to economic associations, or *Wirtschaftsverbände*). It was not until the revised Constitution of 18 April 1999 (Article 137) that the important role of parties in the process of forming political opinions was mentioned and their political significance formally recognized.
- <sup>2</sup> On the emergence and development of the Swiss parties, see above all Gruner 1977, Pieth 1978, Gruner 1981, Klöti/Risi 1988, Jacobs 1989, Tschäni 1990, and Schneider 1994. Of particular value are the relevant chapters in *Année politique suisse* from 1966 onwards.
- <sup>3</sup> Initially, not all of these parties bore their current names. The CVP (Christian Democratic Party, *Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei*) was founded in 1912 as the Conservative People's Party (*Konservative Volkspartei*). In 1957, the name was changed to Conservative Christian Socialist People's Party (*Konservative Christlichsoziale Volkspartei*), and the current name has only been in use since 1970. The SVP (Swiss People's Party, *Schweizerische Volkspartei*) has been in existence since 1971 and was originally founded in 1936 as the Swiss Farmers', Trade and Citizens' Party (*Schweizerische Bauern-, Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei*, "BGB").
- <sup>4</sup> Based on experience in the UK and the USA, it was assumed for a long time that those systems were the most conducive to stability, as these countries were each based on two large parties of about the same size.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. also Armingeon 2003: 12, Ladner 2004a: 72f.
- <sup>6</sup> In 1935, great losses hit the FDP (-3.2%) and SVP (-4.3%), while gains were made by the LdU (+4.1%), the Young Farmers (*Jungbauern*) (+3.1%) and the Frontists (*Frontisten*) (+1.5%). In 1939, many cantons did not have elections and the mandate holders were simply confirmed for a further period in office ("silent elections"), hence the voter shifts suffer from a "structural mistake". Among the losers were: FDP (-3%), CVP (-3.3%) and SP (-2.1%). Among the winners were SVP (+3.8%) and LdU (+2.9%). In 1943, the distortions due to the silent elections were resolved as far as the four big parties were concerned. Additionally, losses were sustained by the Communist Party because it was banned (-2.6%). In 1947, gains by the newly founded PdA (+5.1%) contrasted the losses of SP (-2.4%) and the Young Farmers (-2.1%).
- <sup>7</sup> For calculations of positioning and polarisation of a party system cf. Sigelman/Yough 1978: 357 and Gross/Sigelman 1984.
- <sup>8</sup> On the behavioural level, the decrease in party ties should manifest in an increase in switch voters (*Wechselwähler*). Compared with other countries the percentage of *Wechselwähler* is rather modest, which can be explained by the large selection of parties, which offer something for everybody, as well as considerable political stability. Voter volatility measured at the individual level (choice of different parties in two consecutive elections) amounts to about 15 and did not change significantly between 1967/71 and 1991/95 (Nabholz 1998: 31).

<sup>9</sup> The percentages are a little too high because, in general, politically active citizens take a stronger interest in such surveys.

<sup>10</sup> Account is only taken of those municipalities which took part in all four surveys and provided complete data. The shares of seats are calculated across the totality of seats; hence, we are not talking of average shares of seats. A comparison of all included municipalities produces the same results.

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