

Switzerland Goes Right: “When people feel threatened, they don’t want change”

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Often seen as a happy place shielded from polarisation, Swiss politics is not immune to xenophobia and hostility towards green policies. An interview with Green member of the Swiss National Council Delphine Klopfenstein Broggini.

In October’s general election, the populist far-right Swiss People’s Party (SVP) cemented its position as Switzerland’s largest political force, receiving 28.55 per cent of the vote for the National Council, the lower house of the country’s federal parliament. In a country with a reputation for stability and moderation, a political party campaigning against “woke madness” and “mass migration” has come out on top amidst anxiety about immigration, the war in Ukraine, and the conflict in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the Greens – who made the biggest gains in the 2019 elections – saw their share of the vote fall back below 10 per cent.

With similar rightward shifts happening across Europe and the Greens on the receiving end of far-right rhetoric, the Swiss Greens’ experience offers useful lessons and caveats ahead of the EU elections in 2024. A conversation with Delphine Klopfenstein Broggini, a Green member of the Swiss National Council since 2019 and recently re-elected in the Geneva constituency, helps us unpack them.

Benjamin Joyeux: What was the backdrop to the latest Swiss elections and what is your takeaway from these results overall?

Delphine Klopfenstein: The general international climate marked by multiple crises – the pandemic, Russia’s war in Ukraine, and more recently the Israel-Hamas war – has had major repercussions in Switzerland, as it has elsewhere. This backdrop has bred fear, which has fuelled populist far-right politicians. Securitarian and isolationist rhetoric resonates most in times of war.

Two major issues dominated the campaign: immigration and xenophobia, and inflation and the cost of living. Immigration is the SVP’s favourite topic and it’s quite clearly what led them to win the election. They really leaned into this issue and reawakened their old openly racist and xenophobic demons. They distributed racist leaflets – for which they were called out by the Federal Commission Against Racism – saying that all foreigners are thieves. Sadly, in today’s climate, the SVP wins with this type of campaign.

Did the SVP target foreigners in general or Islam in particular? And what were their policy proposals?

No, their campaign wasn’t targeted against Islam but against immigrants from Africa. For example, they sent every household [a leaflet](#) that showed a photo of black migrants on the Italian island of Lampedusa with a big red cross over it, next to a photo of a blonde family in a Swiss field [with a big green tick over it]. The SVP really targeted “foreigners” in the broadest sense. In Switzerland, Islam is much less of a topic than in France.

The SVP's main policy proposal was to close the borders and stop accepting refugees, especially asylum seekers. They played on fears of waves of people supposedly invading Switzerland, when in fact the numbers remain very low. They consider foreigners the source of all ills for the country, and they say so openly. For instance, all drug trafficking is supposedly only due to the presence of foreigners. This overt racism is really worrying.

Is this rise of the far right also linked to the question of freedom? Greens are often accused of wanting to stop people from living their lives as they wish, whereas the far right portrays itself as defending the freedom to travel, to eat, to enjoy life.

Yes, absolutely. The Greens are frequently perceived as going around banning things, punishing people, and lecturing everyone. In this context, there was a huge wave of "greenbashing" during the campaign, especially when it came to leading by example. Various "false" scandals surrounding the behaviour of Greens in positions of power conveniently emerged. The far right engaged in a great deal of anti-green manipulation about our supposed lecturing and threat to freedom, which damaged us. More than anything, this shows that we're ruffling feathers.

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But it was really migration and xenophobia that were at the heart of the campaign, together with the underlying idea that by closing the borders, with far fewer foreigners, we'll be able to live well in Switzerland. For the far right, it's about finding scapegoats – migrants, in this case – and then building every argument from there.

And what about the other big campaign issue, the cost of living crisis?

The debate on the cost of living saw the Greens somewhat sidelined; the Socialists struck a chord. With high inflation and rising energy prices in particular, it was a hot topic. But above all, at the heart of the debate was the increasing cost of health insurance, which is already too high and keeps climbing. Everybody pays a set rate, regardless of their income. If this system works poorly, it's because powerful health insurance lobbies refuse any reform. The price of insurance regularly goes up, reaching very substantial sums. For an average family, it can easily cost CHF 2000 [around 2070 euros] a month.

It's something that the Socialists really focused on. The Greens have also been very vocal on this issue: we want to create a single, public health insurance fund with the cost indexed to incomes, so that you pay in proportion to what you earn, and this fund would be run by the state. We said this during the campaign. But as we're not associated with this issue, it got little coverage.

It's the same problem when it comes to health, where we have good proposals and are the only party talking about prevention, but we don't get a hearing. Political scientists have looked at this: if as Greens we talk about the cost of living or health insurance, we amplify the Socialists' voice. Likewise, when the Socialists talk about the climate, for example, they amplify the Greens' voice. That's why during the campaign we tried our best to stick to our issues, those with which we're associated.

So there's the general climate, and then there's this wave that's very hard to stop internationally: the rise of unhinged populist politicians, like the newly elected President of Argentina Xavier Milei, who wants to "take a chainsaw" to institutions. The SVP followed the same playbook with a dirty campaign based on

disinformation in which they pushed the boundaries of the law to get people talking about them.

Did the Covid-19 pandemic also influence the results? Because at the time there was much debate about protecting civil liberties, which the far right really exploited.

The Greens may have lost some support at the time but, more than anything, this context really fuelled the far right. The fiercest Covid sceptics, the biggest opponents of public health measures were most often found on the far right rather than on the left in general or among the Greens in particular.

Restrictions on civil liberties were far less severe in Switzerland than in other European countries. There were of course times when families and friends couldn't get together and young people were fined in a pretty appalling fashion. But it was mainly the far right who exploited this. There were, for example, far-right demonstrations with people marching against Covid protection measures while carrying big cow bells. The Greens were not really associated with the measures taken by the Federal Council because we were not part of it. From time to time, we were fairly critical of certain aspects of these policies. However, there is no doubt that this pandemic period really weakened society, and a weaker society is less inclined to turn to green policies that offer change.

As shown by the fear and threat of Covid, then the war in Ukraine, and now the Israel-Hamas conflict, when people feel their security is threatened, they don't want change. Greens are not associated with protection (or isolationism) as an immediate response to this longing for security.

What's very distinctive about the SVP is that behind this so-called protection it offers lies a very neoliberal foreign policy. It has, for example, been very active in supporting free-trade agreements with Indonesia and the Mercosur states, which is very disloyal to the Swiss agricultural sector that the SVP claims to defend. By supporting these agreements, the party is willing to bring in palm oil from the other side of the world to the detriment of local rapeseed oil. It's totally hypocritical and incoherent.

Is it because this issue is not associated with civil liberties that the SVP can appear to be protecting the Swiss while favouring economic freedom? Meanwhile, the Greens are portrayed as anti-business.

When the Greens say that we can't outsource all our CO2 emissions by manufacturing abroad and that we want to manufacture on Swiss soil by developing local jobs, our opponents try to discredit our arguments, and the SVP has led a real disinformation campaign against us.

We should of course keep in mind that in 2019 the Greens made unprecedented gains in the elections. We went from 11 to 28 seats out of 200. No party had ever risen so spectacularly in Switzerland. That's why it was called a "green wave". The Green Liberals also made gains, while the SVP and the Socialists went backwards, and the centre stalled. Four years later, we only lost five seats in the end, going from 28 to 23 and maintaining a fairly high level of support. These election results were the Greens' second-best in their history. We have to put things into perspective.

How did it go on your patch in Geneva?

The Liberals lost a lot of votes and did badly in Geneva. Of Geneva's 12 representatives in Bern, the Greens have two, as do the Liberals, the SVP, and the populist MCG. The Socialists have three. So we're still playing with the big actors.

The elections for the Council of States [the upper house] saw an alliance between the right and the far

right, which marked a major first. On the one hand, you had the traditional right [the Liberals and the Centre party], going by the name of Entente; on the other, the populist and far right, represented by the SVP and the MCG, a xenophobic party that's pro-public sector employees, as lots of its members are police officers. It's a party that's unique to Geneva, fairly old, very male-centred, and built around a rejection of cross-border commuters.

This alliance between the right and the far right has been very painful for the Centre, which, despite this, has a very humanist wing. When the leadership of the Centre wanted to get together with the SVP and the MCG, there were lots of resignations among more moderate members. They had agreed to support the two best-performing parties at the end of the first round. Except they hadn't expected these to be the SVP and the MCG. So the Entente, long dominant in Geneva, was overtaken by the far right, which had never previously been very strong in Geneva. We then had a second round with two extremists facing off against two incumbents, the Socialist Carlo Sommaruga and the Green Lisa Mazzone. [In the 12 November runoff, Carlo Sommaruga and the MCG's Mauro Poggia were elected].

Paradoxically, the very serious situation in which we found ourselves in Geneva, with xenophobes in the second round, re-energised the campaign, with many public declarations of support: for instance, the feminists behind the [strike on 8 March](#), who never used to take sides, came out in support of the Left and the Greens. As did the tenants' movement and various communities – Kurds, Eritreans, etc.

We need to work on simpler, more direct and more desirable messages.

What's unique about Geneva, where there was a turnout of 41 per cent, is that half of the population can't vote. We're the canton with the most foreigners. In the end, we have just 40 per cent of half the population voting. So these elections can appear as having limited representation.

Who are these Green Liberals who got over 7 per cent of the vote?

The Green Liberals were born in 2007 out of a split in the Greens in Zurich. They are a party more focused on the economy, consumption, and so on, with a vision of taxation and economics that is much further to the right. But the Green Liberals remain very close to the Greens on social issues, same-sex marriage, minority rights, etc. In western Switzerland, they have never really managed to break through, except in the Canton of Vaud with Isabelle Chevalley, a politician who was more to the right.

The Green Liberals were pretty much non-existent in Geneva. Then, a year ago, a group was formed and began to achieve modest success by encroaching on the Centre party's turf and taking votes from us along the way. They've been getting good results, but there's a quorum for sitting in the Grand Council [the Canton of Geneva's legislature] and they missed out with 6.5 per cent of the vote [they needed 7 per cent]. Their only member of the National Council lost his seat. Now they have nobody and they're in free fall.

Do you think these election results are a taster of things to come for the rest of Europe?

For me, it's more than anything a continuation, because at the recent local elections in Germany [in Bavaria and Hesse], the Greens and the Left went backwards while the far right surged. And in Luxembourg, too, the Greens came unstuck. So there's a general wave that hasn't spared Switzerland. There is little we can do in the face of this general climate of fear and closed-mindedness.

But, in my eyes, the other big lesson from these elections is that what Greens say and fight for ruffles feathers: our ideas and proposals entail new lifestyles, new behaviours, and that worries people. Our greatest challenge is to ensure that what we're saying is reassuring. Our vision for society – with much more solidarity, new ways of getting from A to B, and so on – inspires me. But we have to remain consistent and we undoubtedly have to simplify what we're saying. We stick as closely as possible to what scientists are saying on the climate, but it often takes us a while to explain things, and people don't always have time, unfortunately. So we need to work on simpler, more direct and more desirable messages.

It's true that we say things that many people don't want to hear, like the fact that in 30 years' time there will be hardly any glaciers left in Switzerland. But what we're saying is being twisted more and more, particularly when it comes to all the bans that we allegedly want to bring in. And yet I've been in politics for 15 years and haven't written a single proposal to ban anything. We get caricatured a lot. We won so many seats in 2019 that it put a target on our backs. We haven't managed to overcome this. So, without a doubt, we must rethink how we say things and, above all, not let others define us.

Are we now seeing a cleavage emerge across Europe between Greens and the far right?

Yes. We are witnessing clear dichotomies that reveal systematic divides: climate justice versus right-wing populism; open societies versus closed-mindedness; conservatism versus progress; feminism versus patriarchy, and so on.



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Delphine Klopfenstein Brogini has been a Green member of the Swiss National Council since 2019. In October 2023, she was re-elected in the Geneva constituency.

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