

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 1

Artikel: How the main political parties approach the "Fifth Switzerland"
Autor: Lettau, Marc
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051794>

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How the main political parties approach the “Fifth Switzerland”

In the run-up to the 2023 federal elections the biggest parties are reacting to the growing weight of the “Fifth Switzerland”. All now have either an international section or a network for supporters.

MARC LETTAU

A dozen men and women gathered together in the capital city in late summer 2022. They worked doggedly, had lively discussions with like-minded people online – and finally lined up at the end of the meeting to take a group selfie, with everyone grinning and giving a thumbs-up.

What was going on? The Green Liberal Party (GLP) was launching its international section, GLP International. The party felt it was a logical step, as Green Liberal candidates had already achieved noticeable success in the previous federal elections, in 2019.

Founding a section in a small group like this is evidence of a broader trend: the political parties in Switzerland with the largest voting base are leading the way by attaching increasing weight to the role of the Swiss Abroad who want to vote and express their choice. As a result of this step by the GLP, the six largest parties now all have a foreign section or a network for party members abroad.

The number of voters in the “Fifth Switzerland” is steadily rising

This is not surprising given that the number of Swiss Abroad who take an interest in politics and are registered to vote is steadily rising. Around 181,000 eligible people had registered to vote in 2017, and this figure had risen to 218,000 by 2021.

If this trend continues, there may be as many as 230,000 people registered to vote in the run-up to the federal elections on 22 October this year. This also means that the number of Swiss Abroad is growing by around 1.4 % on average, but the percentage of eligible people registered to vote is growing at a good three times that

rate – 4.7 % on average over the last four years. This changes the political weight of the “Fifth Switzerland”. If its potential over the years was comparable to that of Canton Thurgau (178,000 eligible voters), it is now closing the gap – in terms of the number of registered voters – with the cantons of Ticino and Valais. In other words, in close races, votes from abroad could become increasingly decisive.

For the political parties, fulfilling the requirements of those who live abroad is admittedly no less challenging. The six largest Swiss parties are now all investing in the “Fifth Switzerland”. The acute determining factor remains, however, that federal elections are organised at cantonal level. Yannik Beugger, from the general secretariat of the SVP, also mentions this: “Nominating candidates is the responsibility of the cantonal parties.”

No, there is no “Fifth Switzerland” constituency

The reason behind the considerable weight of the cantonal parties is easy to explain: there is no “Fifth Switzerland” constituency; the Swiss Abroad are entitled to vote in their home canton and can also only stand for office in that canton. They therefore represent a very fragmented electorate overall, rather than a political unit.

SVP International, according to Yannick Beugger, will now at least seek dialogue with cantonal parties where there are independent lists of Swiss Abroad candidates standing.

The SP has already had a similar experience. In 2019, SP International ran an independent campaign, ran its own lists in several cantons, and was able to set its own agenda. At the up-

coming 2023 federal elections, SP Geneva is expected to field a separate list of Swiss Abroad candidates. Apart from that, the SP is pursuing the goal of fielding targeted lists of candidates from the “Fifth Switzerland”. In addition, according to the SP international secretary, Sandro Liniger, campaign rallies are to be held in key states.

Lost votes

Anyone talking about the political weight of the “Fifth Switzerland” cannot avoid broaching the relatively charged subject of e-voting. Electronic voting is currently no longer possible in any canton. This means that many Swiss people, particularly those overseas, who are interested in politics, are effectively excluded from political participation in Switzerland. Their postal votes often do not reach Switzerland in time. SP representative Sandro Liniger says, “Without e-voting, turnout among the Swiss Abroad is around one-third lower than it is with e-voting.” SP International is therefore campaigning for e-voting to be introduced.

It is not alone in making this demand. The Swiss Abroad can exert their own pressure: the more they register to vote, the more urgently an answer is needed to the question of how exactly they are to exercise the political rights granted to them.

You can find the extended version of the party survey opposite in our digital edition – at revue.link/theparties

You can download the application form to register to vote here: revue.link/form



The party with the strongest voter base has been active internationally for 30 years



The Swiss People's Party (SVP) was one of the first Swiss political parties to have party structures abroad: SVP International was founded in 1992. It has sections in Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa, and has 'country contacts' in Liechtenstein, Norway, Britain and Hungary. SVP International is chaired by Inge Schütz (Switzerland), who lived in Sweden for years.

2023 elections: SVP International is currently engaged in negotiations with cantonal parties in the cantons in which it is running separate lists. Cantonal sections are responsible for nominating the candidates. They are free to include candidates from the "Fifth Switzerland" on their party ticket. The SVP came out of the 2019 federal elections as the clear winner in terms of number of votes. It won a 25.6 % share of the vote (down from 29.4 % in 2015). The SVP has two seats on the Federal Council.

Online: www.svp-international.ch
www.facebook.com/svpinternational

Contact: General Secretariat of SVP Switzerland, SVP International, info@svp-international.ch

The Social Democratic Party (SP) uses "antennas" to promote international connections



The SP has had an international section, SP International, since 1999. This section is chaired by Gaëlle Courtens (Italy) and Pierre-Alain Bolomey (Switzerland). To promote mutual communication, SP International has also developed a network of so-called SP antennas. These antennas either bring members together at a local level (Berlin, Brussels, Rome, France, Israel) or help bring members who are scattered in more remote locations (Africa, USA) within the fold of the network.

2023 elections: the SP advises its cantonal parties to nominate candidates from the "Fifth Switzerland" too. The party is also planning on running a separate list in Canton Geneva featuring candidates from the "Fifth Switzerland".

The SP came in second place in the 2019 elections. It won a 16.8 % share of the vote (18.8 % in 2015). Two of the seven current members of the Federal Council are in the SP.

Online: www.sp-ps.ch/partei/sp-international/

Contact: Sandro Liniger, International Secretary of the Swiss SP, sandro.liniger@spschweiz.ch

The Liberals (FDP) have integrated the "Fifth Switzerland" for years



The FDP has had an international section since 1992. FDP International works not only to connect the Swiss Abroad, but also to bring the issues faced by the "Fifth Switzerland" to the attention of party members, the parliamentary party and FDP Switzerland through lively discussions. FDP International is also active at a European and global level and collaborates with The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party and Liberal International, as well as helping its mother party maintain good international party relations. The chairperson of FDP International is Helen Freiermuth (Turkey).

2023 elections: FDP International is working with FDP Switzerland and the cantonal parties to clarify the options for lists including the Swiss Abroad. The FDP, which also has two seats on the Federal Council, is going into the elections in third place. It won a 15.1 % share of the vote in 2019 (16.4 % in 2015).

Online: www.twitter.com/FDPInt

www.fdp-international.com/willkommen
www.facebook.com/fdp.die.liberalen.international
Contact: info@fdp-international.com

The Centre has an active network instead of a foreign section



The Centre, formed from the merger of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) in 2020, has no foreign section but does have a network of interested people under the name Die Mitte International (The Centre International). The people involved in this network are often members of a Centre cantonal party. Contact with the network – and communications with sister parties abroad – are the responsibility of the delegate for international affairs, appointed by the party leadership. The current delegate is National Councillor Elisabeth Schneider-Schneiter (BL).

2023 elections: the party welcomes the nomination of "people with a strong local presence" from abroad, but does not make having them as candidates a requirement for the cantonal parties. The CVP and BDP had a total share of 13.9 % of the vote in the 2019 elections (15.7 % in 2015). They have since combined to form the Centre party and have one seat on the Federal Council.

Online: the network's online presence is in the pipeline. Centre party website: www.die-mitte.ch.

Contact: international@die-mitte.ch

Green Internationality – even without an international section



The Greens are as yet without an international section. Party members living abroad are currently being sounded out on how they want to consolidate the Greens' work, whether as members of a network or even an entirely new international section. At the same time, internationality is a reality for the Swiss Green party. They are already working together with the Global Greens and the European Greens. Their events are also always intended for the Swiss Abroad.

2023 elections: the party advises its cantonal sections to nominate candidates from the "Fifth Switzerland" too. In Canton Geneva, cross-border candidates are once again allowed to form their own list. The Greens were very successful at the 2019 elections. Their share of the vote rose to 13.2 % (7.1 % in 2015). They have no representatives on the Federal Council.

Online: www.gruene.ch

Contact: contact details for the Green cantonal parties are available at www.gruene.ch/kantonalparteien. Contact for The Swiss Green Party: gruene@gruene.ch.

The Green Liberal Party (GLP) unveils the latest international section



GLP International, founded in September 2022, is the newest international section of a Swiss political party with a strong voter base. The aim of GLP International is "to respond to the desire of the Swiss Abroad to take a more active involvement in Swiss politics, and to ensure that their ideas and perspectives are heard", thereby "contributing towards the modernisation of Swiss politics". GLP International is chaired by Thomas Häni (Germany).

2023 elections: the party is looking to encourage as many Swiss Abroad as possible to stand as GLP candidates in the 2023 elections.

The Green Liberals made strong gains during the previous federal elections in 2019. The GLP scored 7.8 % of the vote at that time (4.6 % in 2015). It is the sixth-largest party and has no representatives on the Federal Council yet.

Online: the GLP International website is under construction. The party already has an online presence at: www.facebook.com/glpinternational
www.twitter.com/GLPInternational1
www.instagram.com/glp_international
Contact: international@grunliberale.ch