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Swiss elections

– one in two did not vote

GENERAL elections have been held in Switzerland. The rest of the world hardly noticed. And with more than half the country not turning out to vote, most Swiss themselves apparently did not care.

But the end of October still saw thousands of solid citizens streaming to the ballot box to elect a new parliament for a four-year term.

The result – a modest swing to the conservative right and marginal gains by anti-foreigner and environmentalist groups.

But as predicted in pre-vote analyses, the balloting brought no significant change to the



overall political pattern which has symbolised Switzerland's stability for almost a quarter of a century.

Since 1959 the four main parties have been allies in a coalition cabinet, a collegiate body without a prime minister. With the Swiss continuing to enjoy high living standards, low inflation and almost no unemployment, spectacular surprises were not expected and

election campaigning was quiet.

As London's *Financial Times* observed: "The surprising feature of Swiss politics is that there are no surprises". The government partners remain the Radicals, the Christian Democrats and the Peoples Party, with the Social Democrats playing an "opposition" role within this coalition quartet.

In the 200-member House of Representatives, these parties now hold 166 seats – an overall loss of three since the 1979 elections. The Radicals (representing the Swiss "establishment") gained three seats to emerge as the strongest single party with 54 representatives – the party's best showing since 1928.

The Social Democrats, split by ideological feuding, lost four seats and now have 47. The Christian Democrats, who draw most of their support from the Roman Catholic electorate, lost two seats and now have 42. The Peoples Party, supported by many of the farming fraternity, retained its 23 seats.

Of the smaller parties, the extreme right wing National Campaign and its allies – which seek stricter immigration controls – improved their representation from three to five. And the "Greens" environmental movement

attracted increased support to step up their seats from one to three.

A slight swing from the Social Democrats to the Radicals also marked voting for the 46-seat Senate.

The elections were contested by fewer than 37 parties and groups. Many were small



regional groups, and several had no real political platform; one called itself 'Pleasure, Peace, and Plum Cake'.

Of the total 246 members of the new parliament in male-dominated Switzerland, 25 are women – the same number as before. But five women were among the 11 candidates polling the highest votes.

Voter turnout was only 48.9 per cent – a slight increase on 1979, when the figure slumped to its lowest level in Swiss political history. The lowest turnout this time was the 24 per cent recorded in Appenzell Innerrhoden; the highest (nearly 74 per cent) was recorded in Schaffhausen – the only canton in Switzerland where abstainers are fined.