

CHAPTER 2

THE PLAYERS

Thanks to history and federalism, the political landscape is very varied. Some parties are strictly local or present only in a few cantons. The second party in the Geneva parliament, the *Mouvement des citoyens genevois* (MCG), is almost strictly local, as is the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, the second party in the Ticino parliament. This fragmentation also exists within big parties. Until the beginning of the 2000s, UDC, which is now the biggest Swiss party, was completely absent in many Swiss French cantons, like Geneva. And even today, in Geneva, it's only the fourth ranking party in the cantonal Parliament.

National parties can differ widely from one canton to another, depending on the local political culture. It's often the canton environment that determines the position of the local branch of a national party, rather than the federal one. A Christian-democrat, for example, can be close to the left in certain cantons or staunchly conservative in others.

Since giving a complete presentation of the players is impossible, I will focus on the main ones.

At the federal level, the government is currently made up of five parties. Left to right, they are:

- The Socialist party (2 seats);
- The Christian-Democrat party (1 seat);
- FDP. The Liberals (2 seats);
- The Conservative-Democratic party (1 seat);
- The Swiss People's Party (UDC) (1 seat).

Between brackets are the acronyms of the different parties in French and German (for Italian, please look in the glossary). The figures I give for the numbers of seats they have refer to the 2011 election. Next one is slated for 2015.

Socialist party (PS, SP)

National Council: 46 seats out of 200
Council of States: 11 seats out of 46
Federal government: 2 seats out of 7

Compared to other western European socialist parties, the Swiss one is a strange mix. On one hand, when you look at its program and listen to some of its leaders, it looks like they never took the realistic turn that many others have, like the British with Tony Blair or the Germans under Gerhard Schröder. It denounces the “neoliberal offensive”¹², the “capitalist world order”, “the capitalist bourgeoisie” and extols the famous French Revolution motto: “Liberté, égalité, fraternité.” It asks for the promotion of cooperatives, the transformation of Limited Companies towards “Corporations of the workers”, etc. They sometimes try to implement these visions. The Socialist Youth, for example, launched an initiative to institute a salary cap. In any firm, be it the café next door or Nestlé, the best paid person shouldn’t earn more than 12 times the salary of the lowest paid. The Socialist party supported it (it was rejected by the voters in 2013).

Why this radicalism? It may be linked to the coalition system: since the party will never rule alone, it doesn’t have

the same incentives to adopt a *Realpolitik*. There is a tendency, by the left, to make very bold proposals as they won’t be accepted anyway. Some call that “marketing politics”.

At the same time, the party has been part of the federal government without interruption since 1959. No way can their ministers support, let alone implement, the ideas they espouse in the party’s program. They are part of a government and, as such, are supposed to swallow their pride and support whatever position it takes, even if they don’t like it. That’s a legal obligation, known as “collégialité” (collegial government). So it’s not rare to see a newly elected minister, socialist or not, add water to their wine and start supporting (or opposing) positions that they opposed (or supported) a few months before, prior to their election. The more exocentric you are on the political spectrum, the more you risk having to do the balancing act. The socialist, firmly grounded left of the political spectrum, does it quite often. One recent example was the current health minister, Alain Berset, who suddenly changed his mind on health policy after he entered the government. “It made me see things from another angle,” he explained. I don’t know if many people believed him. It seems clear that he just played the game.

So the Socialist party can be a proudly left-wing party and a very pragmatic one at the same time. That sometimes infuriates its adversaries, who accuse it of playing a double game. I think it’s just the inevitable result of the system. As there’s no opposition and majority, each party can play, at times, one part or the other.

¹² For those who have a North American political culture, keep in mind that in Europe, “liberal” means “asking for more free-market and less state”, not “undercover socialist”.

Christian-Democrat party (PDC, CVP)

National Council: 28 seats out of 200
 Council of States: 13 seats out of 46
 Federal government: 1 seat out of 7

The Christian-Democrat party is quite diverse. Historically, it has been the party of the Catholics. It's very strong in the Catholic cantons, which are also usually mountain and rural cantons, like Valais or Jura. There, it is often the party of the establishment. In some other cantons, it has a more progressive outlook. In Geneva, even if they classify themselves as centre-right, they don't hesitate to side with the left on certain issues. The stated goal of the party is to try to reconcile the needs of the economy with the need to support the weak. But generally speaking, if you want to make a Christian-Democrat smile, just say, "We should support families better." That's their hallmark. They traditionally consider themselves part of the right, though with the progression of nationalist ideas, the traditional right sometimes calls itself "centre."

The reference to Christendom in the name is not to be overestimated – it's even absent in the Italian name of the party. Christian Democrats usually claim that their core values are derived from that religion, but that's a distant background rather than a day-to-day guide. And in Switzerland, anyway, words like "God" are usually considered out of place in political speech. After serious tensions between Catholics and Protestants during the 19th century (known as the *Kulturkampf*), the Swiss agreed that it was better to leave religion in the private sphere.

Like the other parties of the traditional right, they have been steadily losing importance in the previous decades, as the Socialists and the UDC have been progressing.

FDP. The Liberals (PLR, FDP)

National Council: 30 seats out of 200
 Council of States: 11 seats out of 46
 Federal government: 2 seats out of 7

FDP. The Liberals can be labelled as the party of the traditional establishment and of the economy. It was formed by the merger of the Free Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, which was much smaller and present only in a few cantons.

The Free Democratic Party created modern Switzerland in the 19th century. At the time, it was the party of progressive people in protestant cities – though the party itself was always secular. In several cantons, including Geneva and Vaud, it came to power through revolutions. It massively dominated Swiss politics until the 20th century, when it had to share the power little by little with the other parties. This history is still easily visible on a map: FDP. The Liberals are usually much weaker in Catholic and mountain cantons than in urban and Protestant ones. Its ideology cannot be summarized in one sentence; globally, it advocates free market, civil liberties, personal and social responsibility.

Recent years have been tough for the party. It has been overtaken by the UDC as the biggest party in the country.

Conservative Democratic party (PBD, BDP)

National Council: 9 seats out of 200
 Council of States: 1 seat out of 46
 Federal government: 1 seat out of 7

How can such a small party have a seat in the government? Because it's the result of a split within the biggest Swiss Party, the UDC. More on that under UDC.

The Conservative Democratic party can be described as conservative without excess.

Swiss People's Party (UDC, SVP)

National Council: 54 seats out of 200

Council of States: 5 seats out of 46

Federal Government: 1 seat out of seven

If you've heard of only one Swiss political party, it's probably this one. It has a talent for provoking controversy and making the headlines, which probably helped it becoming the first party in terms of voting percentages. They are the ones that made the (in)famous poster of the black sheep being kicked out of the Swiss flag by a white sheep. They are the ones that led the campaign to ban minarets. They are the ones that launched the initiative against so-called mass immigration. They have wealthy and generous supporters, allowing them to make big campaigns that other parties couldn't afford. And like the Socialists, they are often accused of playing for and against the government at the same time.

They claim to represent the people against the elite and defend Swiss traditions and sovereignty against a variety of threats, like the European Union, excessive immigration and foreign criminals.

These themes were mainly brought forward in the 90s, together with much more confrontational methods (see chapter four). Some cantonal sections of the party didn't like that shift. A conflict broke out in 2007. Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, a member of the UDC Graubünden section, accepted to be elected to the government in place of the minister and party's candidate, Christoph Blocher, against the will of her party (more on this in chapter 4). The result was a split, with the Graubünden section expelled from UDC and creating the more moderate Conservative Democratic Party, later joined by the former UDC Bern section.

This creates an odd situation in the Swiss system. For more than 50 years, the philosophy had been: "Thou shalt distribute power between the parties according to their electoral

weight". But now, we have UDC, the biggest party, which has only one seat in the federal government, fewer than the Socialists and FDP. The Liberals. And that seat is not considered as a very important one: it is the ministry of defence. On the other hand, you have a very small party, the Conservative Democratic Party, which has one too, although its electoral weight shouldn't allow it. And it's the Finance ministry, considered as more important than the defence ministry. Will that situation endure? Probably not after Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf quits the government.

Some parties that are not represented in the federal government but nevertheless deserve a mention:

Green Party

National Council: 15 seats out of 200

Council of States: 2 seats out of 46

Founded in 1983, the Green Party is the only emerging party that has managed to play a significant role at the federal level in a lasting way, alongside the four traditional parties. It has two distinct wings. One is very left leaning, the other more centrist. At the federal level, its representatives are predominantly from the left wing. This left some members unsatisfied, leading the way to the creation of a new party, the Green Liberal Party.

Green Liberal Party

National Council: 12 seats out of 200

Council of States: 2 seats out of 46

The Green Liberal Party was founded in 2007 by four cantonal Green parties, which disagreed with the leftist approach of their national party. Their aim is to reconcile en-

vironmentalism, civil liberties and a liberal economic system. They position themselves at the centre-right.

Mouvement des citoyens genevois (MCG)

Geneva's parliament: 20 seats out of 100

National Council: 1 seat out of 200

Created in 2005 by two ex-members of the UDC, the Mouvement des citoyens genevois (Geneva citizen's movement, MCG) has managed to grab attention very quickly, mainly thanks to its founder and president (since 2008), Eric Stauffer. Eric Stauffer is what French-speaking journalists call a *bon client* (a "good customer"): a dominant personality, always ready to pick up a call from the media and give them strong and colourful statements. The MCG claims to be neither left nor right, but to be representing the people whose interests are not represented by the traditional parties.

Its ideology has two aspects:

-There are too many *frontaliers* (cross-border commuters, French people living in France and working in Switzerland). They create traffic jams and force Geneva residents out of their jobs (academic research tends to show that this last assertion is wrong). Employers should give priority to local residents, whatever their origin or citizenship. That's what they call *préférence cantonale*,

-There are too many criminals, beggars and drug dealers, it's time for a good cleaning of the Augean stables.

It has managed to impose the theme of the *frontaliers* at the centre of the cantonal political debate, but its attempts to create sections in other French speaking cantons haven't had a lot of success.

A moderate member of MCG was elected for the first time to the Geneva government in November 2013, a major step for this very young party.