Clive H. Church and *Adrian Vatter*

Opposition in Consensual Switzerland: A Short but Significant Experiment

SWITZERLAND IS USUALLY SEEN AS A QUINTESSENTIALLY CONSENSUAL, not to say oppositionless, polity. In fact, it is often regarded as one in which the system precludes opposition in most senses of the term.[1] So, over the years it has often been conventionally said that, thanks to direct democracy, the only real opposition is the people.[2] Nonetheless, largely unobserved by most outsiders, an attempt has recently been made to change this. In fact the term was recently adopted and given new salience by the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC), the country's largest political force.[3] As it had done previously, the party threatened in January 2007 to go into 'opposition' if its two members of the seven-strong collegiate government, Christoph Blocher and Samuel Schmid, were not re-elected by Parliament after the October 2007 general elections. This menace was subsequently repeated and when, in mid-December 2007, Blocher, its de facto leader, was defeated as federal councillor by another party member not endorsed by the SVP leadership, the party carried out its threat and formally declared itself to be in 'opposition'. However, from the beginning this proved problematic and, in the end, the party largely dropped the idea and returned to government in January 2009.

[1] G. Ionescu and I. de Madariaga, *Opposition*, London, Watts, 1968, pp. 92–3 and 144–5.

[2] M. Mowlam, 'Popular Access to the Decision-Making Process in Switzerland: The Role of Direct Democracy', *Government and Opposition*, 14: 2 (1979), p. 182, quoting J. R. de Salis.

[3] For details on the SVP see O. Mazzoleni, *Nationalisme et Populisme en Suisse*, Lausanne, Presses Polytechnqiues et Universitaires Romandes, 2003; Hanspeter Kriesi, Peter Selb, Romain Lachat, Simon Bornschier and Marc Helbling (eds), *Der Aufstieg der SVP – acht Kantone im Vergleich*, Zurich, NZZ, 2005; and O. Mazzoleni and D. Skenderovic, 'The Rise and Impact of the Swiss People's Party', in P. Delwit and P. Poirier (eds), *The Extreme Right Parties and Power in Europe*, Brussels, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2007, pp. 85–116.

Even though this seems to have been a relatively short-lived experiment, it deserves an examination that it has not so far received. The questions that need consideration include why exactly is opposition said to be ruled out by the Swiss system? And what did the SVP's strategy of 'opposition' actually involve? Equally, did its intentions and practice reflect what is normally seen as opposition – for example as it exists in the UK? This leads to the question of why, having adopted the strategy, the party did not utilize all the instruments available to a British-style opposition.

The answers seem to be that the SVP's thinking and implementing of opposition were a far cry both from what the party's initial announcements suggested and from the classic British model. While in using the term 'opposition' the SVP initially intended something substantial, what it achieved did not go all that far beyond Helms's model of opposition through direct democracy.[4] And, even here, it was unable to make successful use of direct democracy. In other words, the conventional wisdom is right about the difficulty of conducting UK-style opposition in the consensual and directly democratic Swiss political system.

Indeed it seems as though the party chose the term partly because it had a good ring about it, not because it really believed in British-style opposition to the Swiss centre left. Its choice is also partly to be understood as a new stage in the party's unusual populist evolution.[5] To maintain its momentum the SVP thus sought to challenge consensus, amicable agreement and prevailing traditions of the relative governmental independence of party affiliations. And such aspirations remain. Hence, even if the SVP's strategy of opposition was mainly a rhetorical flourish, its actions represent a continuing and significant challenge to the Swiss political system, although the party has now, apparently, retreated from its attempt at all-out opposition. In fact it found that the norms of Swiss concordance were too deeply rooted both in the system and its own mentality for opposition to work.

Given the significance of what has happened, it matters to comparative politics. This is often behind the curve of Swiss political change. Switzerland needs to be seen as a country with real politics.

[4] L. Helms, 'Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition', *Government and Opposition*, 39: 1 (2004), pp. 45–50.

[5] R. Stämpfli, 'Populism in Switzerland and the EU', in C. H. Church (ed.), *Switzerland and the European Union*, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 79–96.

However, if the SVP is part of the general rise of radical right-wing politics, it differs from other populist parties involved in government.

SWISS CONSENSUS DEMOCRACY AND CONCEPTS OF OPPOSITION

Some years ago, Henry Kerr claimed that, where opposition was concerned, there was little comparison between Switzerland and the rest of the West because neither real conflict nor collective responsibility are involved in the former, while disagreements do not always flow along party lines, let alone just with the government.[6] However, for many people, the integrative impact of direct democracy is the real reason why opposition in the British sense is not really possible in Switzerland. Thus, it has long been argued that all those forces capable of launching a referendum have been brought into the system, allowing them to share power and avoid blockages.[7] Hence, faced with the resulting permanent cartel in government, any new opposition faces an impossible task. The fact that the country is a semi-direct democratic and semi-representative system seems, to many observers, to rule out opposition in any meaningful sense. Past attempts by the Social Democrats to use direct democracy to create an opposition have not really worked, forcing them to remain within the charmed circle of concordance democracy.[8] As a result, only case-by-case opposition is really possible.

Moreover, Ladner and others suggest that, given the way in which direct democracy cuts across party lines, it is normally very hard for parties to make their mark in an oppositional way, mainly because of the relative weakness of parties compared to the apparent strength of

[6] H. Kerr, 'The Structure of Opposition in the Swiss Parliament', *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 3: 1 (1978), pp. 52–5. Cf. also J. Bryce, *Modern Democracies*, London, Macmillan, 1921, p. 350, for an earlier assessment of the weakness of Swiss opposition forces.

[7] W. Linder, 'Political Culture', in Ulrich Klöti, Peter Knoepfel, Hanspeter Kriesi, Wolf Linder, Yannis Papadopoulos and Pascal Sciarini (eds), *Handbook of Swiss Politics*, Zurich, NZZ, 2007, p. 28; and W. Linder, *Schweizerische Demokratie*, Bern, Haupt, 1999, pp. 24 and 246. Cf. also D. Skenderovic, 'Immigration and the Radical Right in Switzerland', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41: 2 (2007), pp. 115–26; and P. Pulzer, 'Is There Life after Dahl?', in E. Kolinsky (ed.), *Opposition in Western Europe*, London, St Martin's Press, 1987, p. 56.

[8] H. P. Kriesi and A. Trechsel, *The Politics of Switzerland: Continuity and Change in a Consensus Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 97–8.

interest groups. Indeed, opposition often spills over from organized interests into the parliamentary arena. At the same time, Bühlmann and others point to the way that cantonal elections cut across wider divides, also blurring oppositional lines.[9] Linder's view is that there is far too little polarization to allow for a real government–opposition conflict. Swiss political culture also helps to explain this absence of opposition.[10] Thus, Steinberg points to an innate dislike of conflict, while Barber claims the Swiss have no fear of the state because it emanates so directly from the people.[11]

This is in line with much general theorizing about the effects of consensus politics on the potential for opposition. According to Ionescu and de Madariaga, the country suffers from 'a certain amorphousness and by elementary consensual activities'.[12] Moreover, multiparty systems have only non-institutionalized, overlapping and shifting oppositions that do not present a clear-cut alternative. 'Real' opposition, in other words, only occurs in majoritarian systems.

Hence, when the SVP announced that it would go 'into opposition', most scholars believed this would not amount to much.[13] There were three empirical reasons for this. First, the SVP had long been in case-by-case opposition, so it was unlikely to change. Second, there was always the possibility that the move could backfire and help the left, as well as possibly dividing the SVP. Third, blocking policies through referendums could cause a breach with business, something that the party's broader aspirations would probably rule out.

If the conventional wisdom was that any SVP opposition would be a very limited affair, no more than a nuisance, there were also contrary views. Papadopoulos, Hakhverdian and Koop and others argue that consociationalism and federalism actually create a potential for populist opposition because they reduce transparency, responsiveness

[9] A. Ladner, 'Political Parties', in Klöti et al., *Handbook of Swiss Politics*, p. 311; cf. also M. Bühlmann, Sarah Nicolet and Peter Selb, 'National Elections in Switzerland', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 12: 4 (2006), pp. 3–4.

[10] Linder, 'Political Culture'.

[11] J. Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 75; and Kriesi and Trechsel, *The Politics of Switzerland*, p. 11; B. Barber, 'Participation and Swiss Democracy', *Government and Opposition*, 23: 1 (1988), p. 45.

[12] Maurice Duverger, cited in G. Sartori, 'Opposition and Control', *Government and Opposition*, 1: 2 (1965), p. 151; and Ionescu and de Madariaga, *Opposition*, pp. 144–5.

[13] 'Cabinet "Can Get By" Without Blocher', *Swissinfo*, 14 December 2007.

and accountability.[14] This is partly due to structures, but it also has roots in changing politics and political culture, as with Rose's claim that there has been a popular revolt against an overly large cartel.[15] The evidence of the SVP experiment suggests, however, that political culture works against opposition while the processes of concordance also make life very hard for a party used to their benefits.

THE LARGEST PARTY GOES INTO OPPOSITION

Whatever the theoretical arguments, it is clear that the SVP did not believe opposition to be impossible in the Swiss context. It had threatened to go into opposition as early as November 2003, when Caspar Baader, the parliamentary group leader, told the SVP Assembly of Delegates in Sempach that this was the party's strategy if it did not get two seats in government next time around.[16] Then, in January 2007, the Payerne Assembly of Delegates again committed the party to going into opposition if Parliament failed to re-elect its two ministers in the upcoming governmental election. It also agreed to exclude anyone who accepted election in their place from the all-important parliamentary group.[17] As the party saw it, this would mean withdrawing from the Federal Council, since the party needed loyal and honest representation in government to defend its positions.

[14] Y. Papadopoulos, 'Populism as the Other Side of Consociational Democracies', in D. Caramani and Y. Mény (eds), *Challenges to Consensual Politics*, Brussels, Lang, 2005, p. 71. Cf. also L. Neidhart, *Die politische Schweiz*, Zurich, NZZ, 2002, p. 351; and D. Albertazzi, 'Switzerland, Another "Populist" Paradise', in D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds), *21st Century Populism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 100–18. Cf. also A. Hakhverdian and C. Koop, 'Consensus Democracy and Support for Populist Parties in Western Europe', *Acta Politica*, 42: 4 (2007), pp. 401–20. Earlier H. E. Glass, 'Consensus and Opposition in Switzerland', *Comparative Politics*, 10: 3 (1978), pp. 361–72, had argued that there was the possibility of building a new opposition force around Social Democratic support.

[15] R. Rose, 'The End of Consensus in Austria and Switzerland', *Journal of Democracy*, 11: 2 (2000), pp. 29–31.

[16] 'Actualité 29 November 2003', at http://www.svp.ch/index.html?page_id= 817&l=3.

[17] 'Stratégie de l'UDC pour les élections au Conseil fédéral 2007 Exposé de Jasmin Hutter, conseillère nationale, Altstätten (SG)', in *SVP Service de Presse* 5, 29 January 2007, at http://www.svp.ch/index.html?page_id=2847&l=3.

The repeated warnings suggest that the party regarded going into opposition as a potent threat. However, it failed to have the desired effect as an alliance of Christian Democrats (CVP) and Social Democrats (SPS), aided by a few Radicals (FDP), acted as parties had often done before and opted for a more moderate and liberal SVP candidate in place of Blocher. This was Mrs Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, the elected director of finance in the Graubünden. She was a convinced supporter of SVP ideas but her position had forced her to work harmoniously with others. The SVP's objection to her was only partly that she was not an unconditional hardliner, more that she was not a national party nominee. After she decided to accept election, the SVP group leader intemperately proclaimed that she and Schmid, the minister of defence, were no longer acceptable as members of the SVP group.[18] Hence the party considered itself as being in 'opposition' since its ideas were no longer represented in government. The party then announced that 'In the future the group will use all the tools at its disposal – inside and outside Parliament – to combat governmental and parliamentary decisions which are contrary to Swiss interests and the party's programme.'[19]

Opposition was thus seen as a potent and elevated weapon: opposition with a capital 'O'. So, to begin with, there was much excited talk of all-out opposition. This would be active and neither passive nor merely policy oriented.[20] It would involve locally based assaults on other parties, total non-cooperation with government, the rejection of all legislation that the SVP did not sponsor and a massive use of

[18] Schmid, a Bernese moderate, had been elected in December 2000 in place of official SVP nominees. The party did not like this but did not then consider leaving the government, given that he had been on their 'long' short list. However, Schmid was never fully trusted and his adherence to his moderate line meant that the party got increasingly irritated with him, especially after he refused to step down when Blocher was deselected.

[19] B. Wüthrich, 'De la menace au pari risqué de l'opposition', *Le Temps*, 14 December 2007; 'Pas un acte revanchard', interview with Christoph Mörgeli, *Le Temps*, 14 December 2007.

[20] For passive opposition see R. A. Dahl, 'Introduction', in R. A. Dahl (ed.), *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1966, pp. xvi–xvii; and for a policy-focused view of Swiss opposition in the past see K. R. Libbey, 'Initiative, Referenda and Socialism in Switzerland', in R. Barker (ed.), *Studies in Opposition*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1971, pp. 203–4.

direct democracy. Blocher himself promised 'astounding revelations' and attacks on dysfunction in government. The party also thought of purging its own doubters by excluding them from seats on parliamentary committees and making them sign up to an agreement to uphold the strategy of opposition. And it claimed to be ready for opposition, with a powerful and dynamic machine, solid social support, a clear programme and much experience in using direct democracy.[21]

In the event, not all of this came to pass. In fact the strategy went through three phases, in each of which opposition became more and more tangential and problematic. Thus, there was an immediate stepping back from extremism, in which the term was formally redefined. Then, in the spring of 2008, the party shifted its attack, seeking to establish new controls over government and its own ranks, making decreasing reference to the term 'opposition'. When this led to the party losing members, the whole strategy came under attack within the party and it moved slowly and reluctantly towards accepting the need to play the Swiss political game, albeit without dropping all of its earlier populist tendencies.

The Hesitant Initial Implementation of the Strategy

The first weeks of putting the strategy into operation saw a series of retreats from the hyperbole of mid-December 2007. These began fairly early, so the party's initial tactics were somewhat defensive. Thus, after a group meeting in December 2007, it announced that it was only opposed to the government and not to Parliament as such. In this arena, the SVP would continue to accept its responsibilities and take up its seats in legislative committees. Neither would there be any change in cantonal cooperation. Overall, the party would look to the 2011 elections, seeking to regain ministerial seats with 'authentic conservative' nominees.[22] Opposition would continue, in other

---

[21] 'Gouvernement et Opposition – La Suisse devant de nouveaux défis', *SVP Service de Presse*, 14 December 2007, at www.svp.ch/index.html?page_id=3457. Cf also W. Wobmann, 'Quel style politique est plus utile au people ?', *SVP Service de Presse*, 10 January 2008, at www.svp.ch/index.html?page_id=3476.

[22] 'UDC: Le parti va définer sa stratégie au printemps prochain', *Swissinfo*, 14 December 2007.

words, until Parliament came to its senses and voted in the SVP's choices. Meanwhile, the exclusion of Schmid and Widmer-Schlumpf from the group was endorsed by 60 votes to 3. However, in January 2008 the Bernese SVP made it clear that it still supported Schmid and recognized him as 'their' federal councillor.

Even at the height of the crisis that was to come, Blocher was denying that the party was involved in opposition for opposition's sake, but instead claimed it was working on a case-by-case basis as before. At the same time, the idea of withdrawing electoral and other cooperation with other parties locally was dropped. The party also continued to demand its fair share of judicial and other appointments. Opposition thus became, first, a matter of fulfilling the mandate given to the party by its electors so that the country's largest political forces and its ideas were properly represented. This meant vigorous and rigorous prosecution of the party's key policies. It also meant holding aloof from some forms of interparty cooperation. Second, it meant seeking to rebuild the party's influence in government, whether in the near future or in 2011, showing that ministries belonged to party manifestos, not personalities. Third, it meant decisive use of the instruments of direct democracy. The outgoing party secretary general summed it up, saying, 'We will keep to our party programme and we will do everything to ensure that government and parliament do not take bad decisions. Referendums and initiatives will be our weapons. And we will win on the street. We have the energy and the financial means.'[23]

This was reinforced when, on 1 March 2008, Toni Brunner of St Gallen was elected unopposed by the Assembly of Delegates as the new president, to succeed Ueli Maurer. He was to be assisted by Caspar Baader, as group leader, and five vice presidents, including Blocher, who was given responsibility for strategy and campaigning. A couple of days after this, Blocher, speaking at his Albisguelti stamping ground, emphasized the policy aims of opposition and the importance of being accountable only to the people. He also developed the party's line on Europe by threatening a popular challenge to the extension of free movement to Bulgaria and Romania unless this was not delayed and demanding an absolute guarantee of Swiss fiscal sovereignty obtained from the European Union.

---

[23] Gregor Rutz, quoted in *24Heures*, 13 December 2007.

Changing the Line of Attack

The party opened a new front in its strategy in late March 2008. Building on the personalization and negative campaigning directed at Lucrezia Meier-Schatz MP, who had been involved in parliamentary inquiries into Blocher's behaviour, the tactic started with increasing pressure being placed on Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. The motivation for the attack may have come from the fact that the opposition strategy was not proving as productive as had originally been hoped. However, the ostensible reason seems to have been a television documentary about the December 2007 election, giving SVP hardliners the erroneous impression that Widmer-Schlumpf had either been a driving force in the defeat of Christoph Blocher or had played a double game. Indeed, the new party president accused her both of lying and of hatching a long-term plot with the Social Democrats. So, not merely was she given a cool reception by SVP deputies when she appeared before Parliament, but Brunner urged her to resign and to leave the party in order to save her local party from expulsion.[24] Then the party issued her with a formal ultimatum on 2 April 2008.[25] She was given until 11 April to resign from the government. If she did not then the cantonal party must expel her by 30 April 2008 or face the consequences.

This move was made because, like all Swiss parties, the SVP is a congeries of cantonal parties, some of which can have very different interests and characteristics from the national norm. So party discipline can be weak. Cantonal autonomy is taken very seriously, especially by a party as committed to Swiss traditions as is the SVP. Thus, prior to all this, the SVP's national constitution had no provision for individual members. All had to be members of a self-governing cantonal party. Moreover, the Graubünden party, which had emerged from a 1970 merger with the local Democratic Party, had always been at variance with the hardline of the dominant Zurich party. This is also true of the Bernese party, which has been more straightforwardly agrarian and largely at odds with Zurich. This had often

[24] The threat to the cantonal party emerged because, as a legal opinion sought by the leadership made clear, the SVP's rules did not recognize individual memberships. Hence she could not be excluded by the executive. Only the Graubünden party could do this.

[25] 'Suite de la procedure exclusion du parti', SVP press release, at www.svp.ch/index.html?page_id=36322.

placed Adolf Ogi, Schmid's predecessor, in a difficult position vis-à-vis his party although he never experienced quite the vitriol that Schmid suffered. In fact 'opposition' strengthened the formal powers of the party's central institutions (and thus of the Zurich wing) over the membership.

Her response to such attacks was that she had never lied nor plotted, and that she would not resign.[26] The Graubünden party leadership discussed this on 9 April and refused to expel her. But, emboldened by good results in the March cantonal elections, the party leadership pressed its attack once the 30 April date had passed. The Central Committee of the SVP agreed on 17 May 2008 by 84 votes to 13 to launch the exclusion process against the Graubünden party, and the exclusion was finally confirmed on 1 June 2008.

However, following an opinion poll that suggested that 65 per cent of the population saw the SVP as a threat to democracy, the party suffered a humiliating reverse at the popular votes[27] of 1 June 2008, failing to win uncommitted voters, even though it outspent its opponents by 47–1. Two of its flagship initiatives, one demanding the right for communes to choose how they decided on applications for naturalization, and the other imposing draconian limits on the ability of government to campaign during popular votes, went down to emphatic defeats. The former was lost by 63.8 per cent to 36.2 per cent and the latter by 75.2 per cent to 24.8 per cent, on a turnout of 44.8 per cent. The medical insurance proposal, which also had SVP support, attracted no more than 30.5 per cent of those voting. Many voters seemed to have had enough of the SVP's extremism and the way it had both inflicted collective punishment on the Graubünden party and made Mrs Widmer-Schlumpf a scapegoat. All this called into question the party's plans for making direct democracy the cutting edge of their oppositional strategy, as was to become even more apparent in February 2009.

At the same time, the party found that its campaign against the Graubünden party had internal costs. Thus on 4 June 2008 Schmid

[26] 'Je voulais sauver le siège de l'UDC à Berne', interview, *Le Matin*, 19 April 2008, at http://www.lematin.ch/fr/actu/suisse/je-voulais-sauver-le-siege-de-ludc-a-berne_9-138106.

[27] Because 'referendum' has a very specific meaning in the Swiss context, the late Christopher Hughes helpfully suggested that 'votation' was a better overall term for the various instruments of direct democracy.

and other Bernese SVP MPs formally left the party in protest at its treatment of the Graubünden section. The latter, moreover, decided on 16 June 2008 that there was no point in appealing against its expulsion and, the following day, announced the creation of a new party, the Swiss Burghers' Party, to which Mrs Widmer-Schlumpf adhered. Four days later, despite appeals from Bernese hardliners, many members of the Bernese SVP, including several elected parliamentarians, set up their own movement. On 1 November the two merged as the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP), which has so far been joined by 11 other cantonal branches. Hence, some estimates are that, whatever the long-term prospects of the new parties – which may find difficulty in establishing themselves in a crowded political arena – the SVP could lose up to 4 per cent of its present vote.[28] In an opinion poll taken before some of the newest branches had been established the BDP gained 3.8 per cent of the vote, while the SVP share went down to 23.3 per cent, which would correspond to a loss of 5.6 percentage points compared to its 2007 position.

The SVP also experienced problems over the question of free movement of labour between Switzerland and the EU. The original agreement of 1996 was due for review in 2009 and the government, supported by Parliament over vehement SVP protest, decided to couple this in one popular vote with the expansion of the agreement to Bulgaria and Romania. The party denounced this as a mockery of democracy. As late as 16 June, it was proposing to challenge this by referendum, which had already been launched by other parties. However, two days later, Blocher advised against this, and the Assembly of Delegates on 5 July accepted his view by 326 votes to 166.

The party's reasons for rejecting a challenge partly reflected its desire to remain the main opposition party and not to appear as hangers-on of a policy pushed by minor, but still rival, parties such as the Swiss Democrats. More significantly, the leadership did not want to offend its business supporters, who need foreign labour. Equally, with its eyes on the next governmental elections, it did not want to offend possible parliamentary allies too much. And, with the decline of public favour evident in the polls, the party may have been aware that its extremism was turning many voters off, so that the party could well suffer another humiliating defeat at the hands of a pragmatic

[28] They chose to set up new parties rather than accept an offer from the FDP. The CVP has expressed its willingness to collaborate with the new formations.

electorate if it chose to oppose free movement.[29] However, this was very badly received by the grassroots of the party, leading its youth wing and several cantonal branches to ignore the Blocherite line and join in collecting signatures for a challenge to the extension of free circulation. There was also dissidence inside the Action for a Neutral and Independent Switzerland (AUNS/ASIN), the SVP's linked pro-neutrality and anti-internationalist social movement.

The grassroots also found itself bemused by the leadership's line on the army, of which it had always been a fierce supporter. In late July the party threatened to oppose much of the regular army equipment budget if Schmid remained in place. This reflected increasing dissatisfaction with Schmid's less than dextrous handling of revelations that Roland Nef, the new head of the army, was facing a lawsuit for abusing his marital partner. This led the party into alliance with the Social Democrats against the military budget, threatening to deny the army equipment it needed. Faced with grassroots resistance, the party started to backtrack, seeking to delay further debate. Not surprisingly, observers began to talk of the party being in disarray and Maurer had to be called back to take charge of the Zurich party.

Endgame?

From the early autumn of 2008 these weaknesses were further exposed as it became more and more likely that Schmid would resign, such was the level of press expectation following criticisms of his careless handling of the Nef affair and his difficulties with the arms budget. So, although as late as 3 November he was saying he would not resign, his resignation would open up a way of returning to government ahead of 2011. However, it also forced the party to face openly the questions of whether supporting Blocher was realistic and whether the strategy of opposition was working. Increasingly it seemed that both men would, in effect, be ditched. Indeed, from the summer the term 'opposition' had hardly ever been used.

Doubts about the wisdom of supporting Blocher were widespread in the parliamentary party, since on 29 September the parliamentary

[29] C. H. Church, 'Setting Limits to Europhobia? Recent Developments in Swiss Euroscepticism', in K. Arato and P. Kanisk (eds), *Euroscepticism and European Integration*, Zagreb, Political Science Research Center, 2009.

group refused to make any nomination for a replacement, despite pressure to name Blocher. This was probably due to a combination of doubts over his apparent thirst for revenge and warnings from other party leaders that choosing him would condemn the party to remain in opposition for years to come. However, the party did change its rules a week later to exclude any SVP member who accepted ministerial office without official party backing. This was apparently partly aimed at stopping any chance of other parties nominating Bruno Zuppiger, an independent-minded MP, disliked by the Zurich hardliners.

Adding to the party's difficulties was the fact that the challenge to the free movement proposals gained sufficient signatures on 3 October. The youth wing and militant sections at once began to mobilize support for a No vote. With a third of the parliamentary party apparently in favour of the proposals, the party could only pass over the problem in silence at its delegate meeting. Election and poll results were also less impressive than previously. The party's links to the big banks helped prevent it from coming up with a clear response to the credit crunch and the economic downturn. Ironically, this was being dealt with very effectively by Mrs Widmer-Schlumpf, who was in charge of the financial portfolio, as well as her own, while the finance minister was laid low by a heart attack.

Things came to a head early in November when Schmid was rushed to hospital with a gall bladder problem. On 6 November he announced his resignation, to take effect at the end of the year. This was partly due to his health and partly because his arms programme had been saved so that he could leave on a high note. Although the lower house had rejected it, the upper house supported it. Moreover, because of grassroots pressure, SVP MPs on the defence committee agreed on 12 November to accept the budget, albeit with a face-saving call for a further review of defence policy.

Five days later, the Zurich party formally nominated Blocher as a candidate for the vacancy. Other party branches made their own suggestions. However, the other parties – who had clearly lost any fear of the SVP as an opposition force – made it increasingly clear that they would only accept a moderate candidate who would play the collegiate game and respect the country's international commitments. Pascal Couchepin, president of the Confederation, and others said the party should make it clear why it wanted to return to government. Was it willing to act constructively and uphold true concordance as a true party of government?

That it should do so was the demand of politicians such as Fulvio Pelli of the Radicals and an increasing number of SVP MPs. Thus the outgoing speaker of the National Council, André Bugnon, argued that opposition only worked if the government was of a very different hue. Rejecting sensible conservative proposals on partisan grounds was not part of the Swiss tradition. Others were clearly fed up with the strategy because it meant that they were often rendered impotent by being excluded from consultation on key dossiers. Furthermore, being in opposition made the SVP an easier target for the Social Democrats and Greens, in a way that being in government did not.

While Blocher said he still regarded the party as being in opposition – as did the grassroots – the tide was turning, especially among the parliamentary group, who had to live with the downside of opposition. They were aware that parties that were supported by 71 per cent of the electorate could govern well enough without them. Hans Fehr of AUNS said that if they stayed in opposition they must develop a better strategy, admitting that their existing course had failed. The party had clearly not become more dangerous by staying outside the charmed circle. Party president Brunner publicly recognized that seeking to push Blocher alone – who was rejected by 68 per cent of the electorate in a poll – would condemn the party to further damaging exclusion.

As a result the party finally nominated both Blocher and Maurer – who had originally said he was not available – as its candidates. While the SPS saw this as blackmail, the majority of parties accepted it. The nomination of Blocher proved to be a final courtesy to a former leader. Thus he was not interviewed by the left while the CVP, which did, simply told him it would not vote for him. Maurer, conversely, was heard at length and was able to convince them that he would play the game and accept government policy on things such as not banning minarets and upholding free movement.

In the event, he just scraped through, since on the first round he only obtained a few votes more than Blocher, while Hans-Jorg Walther, the SVP MP and head of the Swiss Peasants' Organization gained over 100 unsolicited votes from the left and centre. Blocher then withdrew and most of his votes went to Maurer, but he was still behind a very unhappy Walther who was all too well aware how his party would react to a successful nomination. On the third round Maurer scraped through by one vote, with one blank ballot paper.

For the leadership of the Radicals this meant that the SVP was now a proper partner. However, there are clearly limits to this. On the one hand, the party tried to block the budget, although cutting expenditure at a time of recession was a problematic stance. On the other hand, at the end of November, the party reversed its June decision and came out in favour of rejecting the free movement proposals. It went on to campaign enthusiastically against them, even though many of its business allies and MPs supported them. This proved to be a considerable mistake as the party suffered another embarrassing defeat on 8 February 2009 when the 'No' camp carried only three and a half (alpine) cantons and lost by 40 per cent to 60 per cent, a far higher margin than in previous votes on free movement. Not merely was the party divided over its stance but it also saw the BDP win a seat in Glarus, enabling it to form a parliamentary group. So, as well as no longer being in self-proclaimed opposition, the SVP's campaigning abilities have been hit by the experiment.

EVALUATING THE EXPERIMENT

There are two linked ways of evaluating the SVP's strategy between late 2007 and early 2009: asking how it measures up to existing conceptual models of opposition and comparing it with the British ideal type. Unfortunately, political science in general has been somewhat neglectful of opposition as such.[30] Much of the discussion dates from the 1960s and the work of Robert A. Dahl. Unfortunately, his attempts to investigate the Swiss case were rather limited. Equally Helms's more recent suggestion that there is a distinctively Swiss direct-democratic model of opposition fails to come to terms with the SVP's strategy.[31] Thus Helms plays down both the non-parliamentary, non-presidential nature of the Swiss system and the significance of its federalism and bicameralism, not to mention its political culture.

Switzerland clearly shares some of the factors that, for Dahl, promote opposition: the constitutional structure, the electoral system,

[30] Compare Ionescu and de Madariaga, *Opposition*, p. 2 with G. Parry, 'Opposition Questions', *Government and Opposition*, 32: 4 (1997), pp. 457–8. Many current textbooks on British and European politics do not really deal systematically and in detail with opposition.

[31] L. Helms, *Politische Opposition. Theorie und Praxis in westlichen Regierungssystemen*, Opladen, Leske + Budrich, 2002, pp. 155–78.

cultural premises, the grievances involved, the social and economic situation, as well as specific cleavage conflict patterns and the extent of polarization.[32] While the constitution promotes opposition through direct democracy, the electoral system can militate against this. However, there is a strong inward-looking cultural base to the SVP's support, notably where political culture is concerned.[33]

Equally there are long-standing grievances and divisions over Europe, immigration and the alleged left-leaning nature of establishment domestic policies. The socio-economic dimension is less marked, although the party's support has been seen as coming from the losers of globalization.[34] Polarization has also been promoted by opposition, and vice versa. However, Switzerland does fit Blondel's contention that a liberal state can facilitate opposition.[35]

If we look at Dahl's criteria for assessing patterns of opposition,[36] the SVP can be considered a highly organized and concentrated force. Not only is it tightly controlled and managed, despite its federal structure, but it has also absorbed much of the support of competing far-right parties. Moreover, it is closely linked to AUNS, which makes it a more potent and cohesive force than its rivals. Hence it is distinctive and easily identifiable, to take up a second of Dahl's criteria. Third, Switzerland has a wide degree of competition, thanks to its variety of electoral systems and the advanced multi-partyism that these encourage. This competition is fought out not only in general, but also in cantonal and communal elections. Here

[32] R. A. Dahl, 'Explanations', in Dahl, *Political Opposition*, pp. 349–51; J. Blondel, 'Political Opposition in the Contemporary World', *Government and Opposition*, 32: 4 (1997), pp. 471–8, suggests this is too complicated and that the categories could be consolidated.

[33] K. B. Warren (ed.), *The Violence Within: Culture and Political Opposition in Divided Nations*, Boulder, CO, Westview, 1993, pp. 1–2. Cf. also Blondel, 'Political Opposition', pp. 475–6; and R. A. Dahl, 'Introduction', in R. A. Dahl (ed.), *Regimes and Oppositions*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1973, pp. 5–6.

[34] Hanspeter Kriesi, Edgar Grande, Romain Lachat, Martin Dolezal, Simon Bornschier and Timotheos Frey, 'Globalization and the Transformation of the National Political Space', *European Journal of Political Research*, 45: 6 (2006), pp. 921–56.

[35] B. Grodsky, 'Resource Dependency and Political Opportunities', *Government and Opposition*, 42: 1 (2007), pp. 99–100.

[36] R. A. Dahl, 'Patterns of Opposition', in Dahl, *Political Opposition*, pp. 332–47. Here too Blondel, 'Political Opposition', pp. 468–9, like Gordon Smith, *Politics in Western Europe*, Aldershot, Gower, 1989, pp. 106–7, believes that the categories can helpfully be compressed into the twin questions of difference and strength.

the SVP is probably much more adept at using these than others. Competition is also visible in the media.

Dahl's last two criteria are goals and strategy. The SVP clearly wants to change the personnel of government but beyond this its aims are unclear. Initially it was aiming more at regaining what it sees as its rightful share of power than at replacing the government as a whole. In fact, the key element in its thinking is that its ideas are not represented in government. Moreover, it would certainly change the style of governance if it could. Equally it aims to resist policies on the country's international relations, migration, identity and social welfare. However, its interests in socio-economic affairs are more defensive than structural, with an emphasis on cutting taxes and reducing regulation.

Its strategies for obtaining its goals seem to embrace a number of the possibilities enunciated by Dahl.[37] It clearly wants to get back its governmental representation but it will also work with sympathetic parties to make policy gains, which is a must in the Swiss political system even when it has (only) 30 per cent of the vote, and where there are policy-dependent shifting alliances instead of coalitions with fixed agreements. However, while in some ways the SVP is not a revolutionary party, it can borrow from the instruments that Dahl attributes to revolutionary oppositions: using all strategies to disrupt the normal operation of government, discrediting it and imposing its own legitimacy, even if this means encouraging instability. In other words, it adopts what Dahl calls a 'System II' strategy of seeking its goals at the expense of stability, putting ideological consistency ahead of factual analysis and changing rules and structures wherever possible.[38]

Other scholars have preferred to classify oppositions in different ways. Thus von Beyme classifies them as issue oriented, competitive and cooperative, the first two of which would apply to the SVP.[39] Macridis says that the characteristics of a parliamentary opposition are that it is organized, permanent and representative, while being both an alternative to government and a participant in the political process. The SVP meets all of these criteria except being an alternative government as such.

[37] Dahl, 'Patterns of Opposition', pp. 344–6.

[38] Ibid., p. 356.

[39] K. von Beyme, 'Parliamentary Opposition in Europe', in E. Kolinsky (ed.), *Opposition in Western Europe*, London, Croom Helm, 1987, pp. 31–3.

More recently, as already noted, Helms has argued that there are five forms of opposition, including the Swiss or direct-democratic model.[40] Direct democracy is for him the heart of opposition in Switzerland, disproving the conventional belief that there is no such thing in the country. However, he sees it as not marked by aggressive or violent opposition even if it is open to influence by well-resourced lobbies. This really fails to come to grips with the SVP's new strategy and role. In fact the evidence of 2008 suggests that an opposition strategy based on direct democracy can be a double-edged weapon, even if the party insists that the problem is the unfair use made of it by the political class. Hence it has renewed its commitment to its initiative on greater popular control of international agreements, and it continues to revile both government and parliament for refusing to trust the people. In other words, it moved away from seeing itself as mainly opposed to the centre right, to resisting all parties and even the system itself. And, as in other post-consociational countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands with the Vlaams Belang and the List Pim Fortuyn, the Swiss concordance system has been challenged by this. The arrival of a strong right-wing populist party with an anti-establishment bias has made elections more volatile and polarized, even if coalition niceties have apparently been maintained.

Obviously this is all somewhat removed from opposition as it is known in the UK, the epitome of parliamentary opposition systems.[41] In the UK, opposition dates back to at least 1826 and is constitutionally recognized and generally accepted as necessary, official and wholly legitimate.[42] Hence the talk of the loyal, or Her Majesty's, opposition, a concept that accepts the constitutional framework while believing that the government and its policies should be subject to attack. So the opposition is office-seeking, but only within the established framework.

Not only does the British opposition hold the government to account for both its behaviour and its policies, 'highlighting

[40] L. Helms, 'Five Ways of Institutionalizing Political Opposition', *Government and Opposition*, 39: 1 (2004), p. 25.

[41] A. Kaiser, 'Parliamentary Opposition in Western Democracies', *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 14: 1–2 (2008), pp. 20–45, argues that the Westminster model is out of kilter with reality and that, such is the variation between states, there is no single Westminster model.

[42] M. Engel, 'Opposition's Attractions', *Financial Times Magazine*, 29–30 March 2008, p. 8. Cf. G. Ponton, *Opposition*, London, Politics Association, 1976, pp. 18–20.

incompetence and folly', as Engel puts it,[43] but it also seeks to present itself as an alternative government with, importantly, a long-term programme of its own.[44] Hence the creation of a Shadow Cabinet, composed of MPs, sitting to the left of the speaker, who '*shadow*' ministers and their portfolios. The opposition must challenge the government at elections, offering the electorate a clear choice between rival approaches, ideas and teams.

To facilitate its role, the opposition is given rights of consultation on the parliamentary agenda and matters of high politics, together with allocations of 20 'supply days' for debates on topics of its own choice.[45] Equally, it has rights to seats on Parliamentary Committees, to put questions to government and to be allowed to reply to government statements in Parliament and in the broadcast media.[46] Money is also made available to support the leadership and enable the Shadow Cabinet to undertake the policy research that will help it to question and rival government.[47] This tends to strengthen the position of the leader of the opposition while limiting backbench influence. So, while never enjoying a monopoly of opposition, Her Majesty's Opposition provides an alternative so that the electorate can 'kick the rascals out'.[48]

British-style opposition has its weaknesses, notably the encouragement it gives to adversarial 'yah boo' politics. Nonetheless, having an opposition is still seen by political scientists as the basis and epitome of Western democracy, thanks to the way it facilitates peaceful government succession.[49] Indeed, Peter Mair has argued that the real

[43] Engel, 'Opposition's Attractions'.

[44] R. Macridis, *Modern Political Systems: Europe*, 5th edn, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall, 1963, p. 8.

[45] These are now divided between Conservatives (17) and Liberal Democrats (3).

[46] This is something demanded by the SVP on 'Arena' but denied in the name of pluralism.

[47] This is usually known as 'Short' money after the minister who devised the funding scheme in the 1970s. See N. Johnson, 'Opposition in the British Political System', *Government and Opposition*, 37: 4 (1997), pp. 487–509.

[48] Ponton, *Opposition*, p. 21; R. M. Punnett, *Front Bench Opposition*, London, Heineman, 1973, pp. 27–32. In Switzerland, of course, tradition means that it is very hard to remove a sitting minister. This only happened three times between 1848 and 2002. Generally speaking, ministers decide the time of their own going, unless they are in trouble, when they can be persuaded to resign, as with Elizabeth Kopp in 1989.

[49] Ionescu and de Madariaga, *Opposition*, pp. 8–9. Cf. also Smith, *Politics in Western Europe*, p. 2.

problem of EU democracy is the fact that it has become depoliticized and provides no channel for opposition.[50] The future lies in giving opposition a voice.

Compared to this, the SVP's opposition remained underdeveloped. Indeed, apart from not having Blocher opposing from inside government, there was not much difference from the party's behaviour prior to December 2007. On the one hand, the SVP did not regard itself as a 'loyal' opposition, especially as it came close to questioning the system. Nor did it create alternative structures. Thus, while in March 2008 the SVP hinted at a kind of shadow cabinet in the form of its new seven-strong leadership, this was more of a symbolic act that did not have any further consequences. The party leadership did not claim to be an alternative government; nor did anyone regard it as such.

Equally, it never developed a wide-ranging alternative programme that could be offered to the electorate. And, though it was critical of much done by the government, its record on this was patchy and uncertain. Clearly it was unhappy that this encouraged it to oppose everything that emerged from government. In any case it had no special procedural of consultative rights or support for this strategy. It had no more and no less than any other party. In fact it deliberately denied itself these, notably by backing out of the formal process of pre-session consultation. Neither does it have a legislative veto in the way that the Democratic Party of Japan now has. Not surprisingly, its 'opposition' role was recognized neither by the Constitution nor the greatest part of the public.

There seem to have been three reasons for the SVP not making more use of its strategy. To begin with, the structures were against it since there was no single-party government in power for it to oppose, despite its claim that a centre-left cabinet was in office. Second, consensus was thus deeply rooted in the party's culture: hence they concentrated on recapturing their natural rights. It was this, more than direct democracy, that inhibited its attempt at opposition.[51] And finally, it does not appear that the SVP had thought the concept

[50] P. Mair 'Political Opposition and the EU', *Government and Opposition*, 42: 1 (2007), pp. 1–17.

[51] Having two nominal representatives in government and too little time for direct democracy to work may have affected opposition. Cf. also A. Vatter, 'Vom Extremtyp zum Normalfall? Die Schweizerische Konsensusdemokratie im Wandel', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 14: 1 (2008), pp. 1–48.

through. The idea of opposition seemed a good one with which to legitimize the party's ire and to browbeat other parties. So, despite the initial bluster, the party was caught short both by having to act on its threats and by the side-effects on party discipline it promoted. Moreover, Swiss consensus fought back, both from outside and inside, whereas the SVP neither 'won on the street' nor produced a quiverful of successful new initiatives and referendum challenges. Hence, as its critics said, it had to go down on its bended knees to other parties asking to be let back in.

In other words, the party's strategy has to be seen more as a rash populist challenge to the system than as a well-prepared and executed exercise in traditional 'UK-style' opposition within the system.[52] It rested in part on the false assumption that the party was facing a unified government and in part on populist desires to fulfil the mandate given to it by the people, to enforce its ideological line and to secure party control over ministerial nominations. So the SVP increasingly called the system into question, threatening, in the eyes of many, to undermine consensus rather than upholding it, as it claimed.[53] Had it had its way the system would have been changed beyond recognition and Parliament reduced to something close to the whipped subordination of Westminster. Equally, its demand that Widmer-Schlumpf and Schmid should resign can be seen as a breach with other, unspoken, traditions of governance. It is probably fair to say that the party sought to shift the system onto a new basis that, if not purely majoritarian, is dominated by the interests of party ideology.[54]

While outsiders have often regarded the smaller right-wing parties as the Swiss populists, it is arguable that it is the SVP – and not direct democracy – which is the real populist force in contemporary Switzerland.[55] Thus although the party does not use the term of itself,

[52] It could be argued that the SVP's strategy has something in common with that practised by opposition parties in non-democratic regimes. See A. Stepan, 'Democratic Opposition and Democratization Theory', in A. Stepan (ed.), *Arguing Comparative Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 662.

[53] The Club Helvétique, in its 'Une Concordance pour aujourd'hui et demain' of November 2006, drew attention to the threat posed to concordance by the SVP's populism and personalization of political conflicts.

[54] This is what Dahl would call System II opposition.

[55] C. Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39: 4 (2004), p. 542; C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge

the SVP shares populism's ambiguity about representative government, seeking to subject this to popular control.[56] It also shares the populist belief in a united, inherently good and sovereign people, of which the party is the only true voice. As a result, the party rejects domestic multiculturalism, not to mention excessive migration and the abusive use of rights of asylum.[57] In fact the SVP shares with many other populist parties a moralistic, not to say revivalist, stance in its denunciation of abuses in welfare and asylum. Welfare chauvinism is not absent in all of this.

However, the party also differs from the European norm in several respects. Thus it is very much a party, devoted to asserting party rights over everything else.[58] And it is much more organized and professional than many of its fellow populist parties, developing new leaders beyond Blocher. Equally it has highly consistent and focused policy commitments, embracing both the neo-liberal and the national, contrary to Betz's dichotomy.[59] In 2008 it added to this a rancorous determination to enforce its internal discipline. Equally, it has also

University Press, 2007, pp. 296–7. Cf. also Y. Mény and Y. Surel, 'The Constitutive Ambiguity of Populism', H. Kitschelt, 'Popular Disatisfaction with Democracy', and H. G. Betz, 'Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure', all in Y. Mény and Y. Surel (eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002, pp. 2, 7 and 191–3 and 201–2 respectively; Hakhverdian and Koop, 'Consensus Democracy and Support for Populist Parties', pp. 402–5; D. Albertazzi, 'The Lega dei Ticinese', *Politics*, 26: 2 (2006), pp. 133–9; and P. Taggart, 'Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9: 3 (2004), pp. 273–6. On direct democracy as populism see M. Canovan, *Populism*, London, Junction Books, 1981, p. 198.

[56] Albertazzi, in Albertazzi and McDonnell, *21st Century Populism*. Cf. also Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', pp. 559–61; and A. McGann and H. Kitschelt, 'The Radical Rights in the Alps', *Party Politics*, 11: 2 (2005), pp. 147–71.

[57] E. Ivarsflaten, 'What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases', *Comparative Political Studies*, 41: 3 (2008), pp. 3–23; and D. Skenderovic, 'Immigration and the Radical Right in Switzerland', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 41: 2 (2007), pp. 115–26. Cf. also H. G. Betz, 'Mobilizing Resentment in the Alps', in Caramani and Mény, *Challenges to Consensual Politics*, pp. 154–60; and Albertazzi and McDonnell, 'Switzerland: Another "Populist" Paradise', pp. 100–18.

[58] This was made even clearer in February 2009 when Brunner called for new rules restricting election to the Federal Council to candidates duly nominated by their party, in return for which the SVP would drop its own exclusion clause.

[59] H. G. Betz, *Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1994.

been able to function adequately in government, which is not true of many other similar parties.[60]

In any case, none of the three populist forces that have, or have had, a presence inside government have tried a similar experiment or made much use of the rhetoric of British-style opposition. None of them have to contend with a konkordanz system like that of Switzerland, let alone face such fierce defence of consensus. All three have to exist in much more bipolar systems. Thus in Italy the Lega has come to terms with its position inside the centre-right coalition by allying closely with Berlusconi, whom it had previously opposed, and stressing devolution rather than separatism.[61] Equally the Danish People's Party has played down its anti-elite line since it became an unofficial component of government.[62]

In Austria, the closest parallel, the arrival of the FPO in government in 2000 may have caused a Europe-wide crisis but it also created tensions inside the FPO with Haider, who did not himself join the government, continuing to use populist tactics.[63] This failed to appeal to the electorate and in the 2002 elections the party's support fell to 10 per cent, leaving the party as a dependent coalition party. Then, in 2005 the divide between pragmatists and populists led to an open break, with Haider and most ministers seceding to form the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZO). This remained a coalition partner whereas the FPO, now led by Strache, promised to remain in opposition. This parallels the internal resistances experienced by the SVP strategy in 2008. And, after a period of difficulty, the two won 29 per cent of the vote in 2008, forcing the restoration of the existing Grand Coalition. It may well be that, following the death of Haider and the

[60] R. Heinisch, 'Success in Opposition – Failure in Government: Explaining the Performance of Right-Wing Populist Parties in Public Office', *West European Politics*, 26: 3 (2003), pp. 91–130. But cf. M. Minkenberg, 'The Radical Right in Public Office: Agenda-Setting and Policy Effects', *West European Politics*, 24: 4 (2001), pp. 1–21.

[61] D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell, 'The Lega Nord', *West European Politics*, 28: 5 (2005), pp. 952–72. Cf. also A. Wilson, 'Election Report', *West European Politics*, 32: 1 (2009), pp. 215–19.

[62] J. Rydgren, 'Right Wing Popular Parties in Denmark', *West European Politics*, 27: 3 (2004), pp. 474–502. Cf. also K. K. Pederson, 'Election Report', *West European Politics*, 31: 5 (2008), pp. 1040–8.

[63] W. Muller and F. Fallend, 'Patterns of Party Competition in Austria', *West European Politics*, 27: 5 (2004), pp. 801–35; D. Art, 'Reacting to the Radical Right', *Party Politics*, 13: 3 (2007), pp. 331–50. Cf. also K. Luther, 'Election Report', *Western European Politics*, 31: 5 (2008), pp. 1004–5.

enforced resignation of his successor, the two parties may merge, thus possibly threatening a similar populist showdown to that attempted in Switzerland.[64]

In other words, the Swiss experiment remains something of a 'one-off'. Although it seems to have failed – something of course denied by Blocher and Maurer, who believe this overlooks both the achievements in policy terms and the fact that the experiment has not been running for very long – it is not insignificant. On the one hand, it lasted longer than might have been expected and showed that the party was sufficiently pragmatic to abandon it. On the other hand, the party has not given up its underlying populist ambitions and it may not yet have exhausted all its potential. Hence it is likely to remain a major threat to the Swiss status quo even if consensus has been upheld domestically and externally, underlining the emerging European conflict between popular and liberal constitutional democracy. So, while some scholars see populism as episodic and uncertain to endure, the SVP is unlikely to fade away.[65] Its ample resources and internal dynamism, along with the popular fervour it evokes, mean that it is likely to be an example of lasting, not occasional, populism.[66]

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

All this shows that Swiss politics in general are changing. In fact, new studies clearly demonstrate that, due to recent political and institutional changes, a reformed consensus democracy, which adjusts and normalizes previous Swiss exceptions in line with the rest of the

[64] Interestingly, Walter Wobman, an SVP MP, attended an anti-Lisbon conference run by the FPO in early February 2009 and attended by parties such as the Danish People's Party, Vlaams Belang and the Front National.

[65] Mény and Surel, 'Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure', p. 18; and Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', p. 563. Cf. also P. Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000, pp. 1 and 87–8; and D. Albertazzi, 'Extreme or Institutionalised? Swiss and Italian Populist Leaders in Government', paper presented at 58th PSA Conference, Swansea 1–3 April, 2008, p. 7.

[66] The Selects07 report by G. Lutz, *Elections fédérales: Participation et choix electoral*, Lausanne, FORS, 2008, pp. 31–3, is cautious about the scale of the party's potential, while recognizing that it is better than the other parties at mobilizing it. Cf. also S. Häusermann, A. Mach and Y. Papadopoulos, 'From Corporatism to Partisan Politics', *Swiss Political Science Review*, 10: 2 (2004), pp. 48–51.

continental European consensus norms, is emerging. This develop-
ment has been further strengthened by intensified public political
contestation, increasing polarization between the political parties
in Parliament and the weakening of the cooperative search for
consensus, previously the dominant mode of negotiation within the
government.[67] Furthermore, recent work by Linder and others shows
that consensus in the direct-democratic arena, as measured by voting
recommendations of the government parties, has lessened in recent
years.[68] Thus the notion of Swiss opposition being restricted to the
people acting through direct democracy needs revision. So does the
assumption that Swiss politics are simply a matter of a few mechanical
structures such as direct democracy. In fact Switzerland is more
relevant, and comparable, than many appreciate.[69] It may not fit the
canons of opposition but it is obviously highly relevant to populism.

At the same time, the SVP experiment points to a need to rethink
opposition in line with twenty-first-century developments. As Helms
has recently indicated, our knowledge and understanding of the
phenomenon are still both patchy and overly empirical.[70] In the light
of recent events, this is also true regarding his conclusions for Swit-
zerland as the epitome of the direct-democratic opposition model,
'that there is no such thing as opposition'. This may be true in many
ways but it is not because of direct democracy. Thus the recent
defeats of the oppositional SVP in the latest national ballots point in

[67] H. Batt, 'Die Transformation der Konkordanzdemokratie', *Zeitschrift für
Politikwissenschaft*, 15: 2 (2005), pp. 345–71; C. H. Church, 'Swiss Elections', *Western
European Politics*, 27: 3 (2004), pp. 518–34, and 31–3 (2008), pp. 608–23; J. Steiner,
'The Consociational Theory and Switzerland – Revisited', *Acta Politica*, 37: 1 (2002),
pp. 1–21; Vatter, 'Vom Extremtyp zum Normalfall?'.

[68] C. Bolliger, *Konkordanz und Konfliktlinien in der Schweiz*, Bern, Haupt, 2007;
W. Linder, C. Bolliger and R. Zürcher, *Gespaltene Schweiz – geeinte Schweiz*, Baden,
hier + jetzt, 2008.

[69] Some years ago Kitschelt admitted that there were gaps in knowledge of Swit-
zerland (*The Radical Right in Western Europe*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press,
1995, p. 277). Things do not seem to have improved. Thus A. Kessler and G. Freeman,
'Support for Extreme Right Wing Parties', *Comparative European Politics*, 3: 3 (2005),
p. 283, mention the SVP as an extreme party but then ignore it, while J. Evans, 'The
Dynamics of Social Change in Radical Right-Wing Populist Party Support', *Comparative
European Politics*, 3: 1 (2005), p. 80, seems to believe that the Swiss Democrats are the
main radical right party.

[70] L. Helms, 'Studying Parliamentary Opposition', *Journal of Legislative Studies*,
14: 1–2 (2008), pp. 7–9 and 45.

another direction since the people were opposed to the parliamentary opposition. Consensus politics is the main factor at work in blunting opposition.

In any case, if the aim of the SVP was to recapture the place in government bestowed on it by concordance, opposition against government was somewhat illogical; so was the unprovoked attack on its own ministers. To this extent the conventional wisdom seems to have been correct. As Mazzoleni has said, to be in opposition in Switzerland, one has to be in government.[71] If the experiment was a tactical failure, the populist strategy remains. So the future remains uncertain.

[71] O. Mazzoleni, 'Une année difficile pour la droite nationaliste', interview on *SwissInfo*, 24 December 2008.