Case Study: Christoph Blocher and the SVP

Introduction

The chosen case study topic concerns the, now retired, right-wing Swiss politician, Christoph Blocher. An industrialist, Doctor of Law and self-made billionaire, he served as a member of the Swiss Federal Council for a term of 4 years. Always a controversial figure, Blocher was responsible for a reorganisation and reorientation of his affiliated party the SVP ("Schweizerische Volkspartei" or Swiss People's Party), beginning locally in Zurich in the 1980's and culminating with the SVP growing to be the strongest party nationally at the 1999 federal elections. Steve Bannon, previously a prominent political strategist for current US President Donal Trump, called Christoph Blocher "Trump before Trump" (Dominik Weingartner, 2018).

Historical Context within Swiss Politics

Traditionally, Switzerland had long been governed by four parties, a socialist party found on the left of the spectrum, a liberal party in the centre, a Christian Democratic party in the centre leaning towards the right and the SVP, which traditionally had been the smallest of the four parties. Together, the four parties gathered an overwhelming majority of votes cast and were well represented in parliament. The executive branch of Swiss government is the federal council (effectively the cabinet) comprising seven members who are leading politicians from the largest 4 or 5 parties. Each council member takes over in rotation the additional representative, presidential roll at the head of the Swiss government. This stabilised, coalition system is unique in the world.

As Nai (2013) describes, there are three possible ways the public can directly exact influence on Swiss law. Popular initiatives, mandatory referenda and optional referenda. In all three cases a "yes" vote will constitute a political reform, whilst voting "no" signifies supporting the status quo and retention of the existing law. In two of the three cases, even a constitutional amendment could be a consequence.

Nai (2013) further posits that historically in Switzerland, campaigns promoting a change in policy are less prone to negativism than status quo campaigns.

Krishnakumar and Müller (2012) recount that in the 1990s the debate over immigration polarized into more left and right-wing positions, when the established SVP, under the initiative of Blocher in Zurich, positioned themselves systematically against immigration and thus adopted for the first time a program with more nationalist-populist elements. The debate

on immigration has since then been a recurring topic, beginning with the 1999 parliamentary elections (Miguet, 2008). Krishnakumar points out that this positioning is also found in other countries, but Switzerland differs from the US in the way that the parties' positions on immigration policy cut across several (although not all) party lines.

Most immigrants according to Krishnakumar and Müller (2012) are from Europe and in the 90s there was a large influx of ex-Yugoslavians into Switzerland. They reason thus, that there are not that many cultural and religious differences compared to other European countries.

Another aspect that differentiates Switzerland from other European countries is its naturalisation law. It is among the most restrictive, whereby an immigrant must have lived for at least 12 years in Switzerland and must be proven to be well integrated into society (Krishnakumar and Müller, 2012). According to papers by both Krishnakumar and Müller (2012) and Miguet (2008), whilst in other European countries opinion polls are employed to derive people's views on immigration and separate their views from politicians', data can be contaminated through hypothetical bias i.e. the fact that participants of polls recognize that their answers will have no direct effect on policies implemented in their country. In the case of Switzerland with its frequent referenda and direct democracy, this disadvantage can be bypassed. Not only referenda and the law separate Switzerland from its neighbouring countries, but also the fact that there can be found deep divides in the small country. As Betz describes, Switzerland is a paradigm of opposites, beginning in the language (most prominently French and German with smaller groups of Italian and Romansh), the rural areas versus the city, religious differences (Protestants versus Catholics) and social class-divides.

The SVP under Blocher has grown into the largest party in Switzerland and is known for its anti-EU and anti-immigration position, its tough stance on asylum seekers and in the past the SVP successfully campaigned per referendum for Switzerland not to enter the EU. This manifested itself in the anti-EU campaign organisation AUNS ("Aktion für eine unabhängige und neutrale Schweiz" or in English The Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland). The AUNS was co-founded by Christoph Blocher after the rejection of Switzerland joining the UN in 1986 in order to prevent any closer association with the EU and the NATO and to maintain the independence of Switzerland.

Fitzgerald and Lawrence (2011) write that from a party-political perspective, the SVP sits closer on the radical right of the spectrum. On a 20-point scale they report that SVP is at 17.9, the Austrian Freedom party lies at 17.4 and the Danish People's Party at 18.3 amongst others. The SVP in contrast to other right-wing parties, however, has existed for longer, being

established in 1971 and was originally – in the pre-Blocher era – a centerist, pragmatic party focused on agrarian politics. Until the 1980s, Miguet (2008) recounts, the SVP was known for its moderate opposition and decision-making was characterised through compromises. The beginning of the nineties were traversed with uncertainty about the capabilities of the political elites and a long period of recession followed. As a result of this, the Swiss People's Party opposed adhesion of Switzerland to the EU and was able to increase its share in the Swiss parliament from 15% in 1995 to 22% in 1999 and to a record high of 30% in 2015, though it recently subsided somewhat in 2019 to 25%. The SVP are notably not the only radical right-wing party in Switzerland. There are three other minor parties, the Lega dei Ticinesi, Swiss Democrats and the Freedom/Automobile Party. The height of success for Blocher came when he was elected 2003 to the Swiss government and served as minister of justice. In this position he became known for pursuing a confrontational style towards fellow ministers, which ultimately cost him his position in the 2008 elections with the formation of a splitter-party the Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (German: Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei Schweiz, BDP) which broke away from the SVP.

In 2003 Blocher was already being compared in an interview to Jörg Haider, a like-minded Austrian politician, who (since deceased) also campaigned very successfully on the same issues as Blocher.

Theoretical Elements

Jagers and Walgrave (2007) have dissected three elements of populism from its common use. Populism is accordingly characterised by evoking "the populous" for purposes of political justification, anti-elite sentiments and the exclusion of certain people not perceived to be "of the same ilk". They also see populism more as a style of communication than as an ideology in itself. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) also make the distinction between thin populism and thicker populism. Thin populism – they postulate – is the communication style of politicians that invoke the people. The politician presents himself as close to the populous, has an ear for what they have to say and is thus an advocate for the people. It is in this case that populism is stripped of its authoritarian connotations. These associations are then added in the thicker definition of populism. Thick populism, according to Jagers and Walgrave (2007), is when the political actors talk about the people and then add anti-establishment and exclusion elements to their rhetoric.

Illustrations

The most famous illustration linked with the SVP is a poster where white sheep kick a black sheep out of a background of the Swiss flag, thus symbolising that the black sheep are the criminals being kicked out of the country. This poster was used widely in the Expulsion Initiative campaign and has been copied multiple times by parties in other countries such as an adaptation by the (Italian) Lega Nord to advertise a "lesson in security from the north". Another variation of the poster has also been used in German elections in Hesse and at a demonstration in Chemnitz. The poster itself has met with a lot of backlash such as the United Nations special rapporteur on racial discrimination, Doudou Diene from Senegal, demanding of the Swiss government an official explanation of the campaign. Swiss Jewish groups have said that the symbolism of the poster, and its use of colour, is frighteningly reminiscent of Nazi propaganda.

This poster was not an isolated case. Another campaign against the building of minarets on mosques in 2009 depicted minarets as missiles indicating a use of fear appeal. Historically speaking, the first initiatives against the influx of foreigners in Switzerland began in 1968 but were either withdrawn or not accepted. The first one to be accepted was the 2009 minaret initiative, then followed by the Ausschaffungs-Initiative (expulsion initiative) in 2010 and the Masseneinwanderungs-Initivative (mass immigration initiative) in 2014.

Conclusion

As the historical examples demonstrate, the issue of foreigners has been a topic discussed for a prolonged period of time and it is unlikely to disappear soon. The last accepted initiative was that of mass immigration in 2014 and it will certainly not be the last. The next opportunity to vote on the issue will present itself on the 17th of May this year (2020) in the form of the Begrenzungs-Initiative (limitation initiative). According to the SVP, who launched the initiative, the previously accepted mass immigration initiative has not been enforced and this is the campaign to do so. Switzerland should suspend the free movement of people and if necessary, terminate it completely. This would also entail Swiss people not being able to live and work in European countries.

Regarding the involvement of Blocher, this has surely been secured with his daughter, Magdalena Martullo-Blocher, following in his political footsteps as vice president of the SVP since 2018. In 2015 she was elected as member to the National Council.

References

Fitzgerald, J., & Lawrence, D. (2011). Local cohesion and radical right support: The case of the

Swiss People's Party. *Electoral Studies*, *30*(4), 834–847.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2011.08.004

Miguet, F. (2008). Voting about immigration policy: What does the Swiss experience tell us?

European Journal of Political Economy, *24*(3), 628–641.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2008.06.005

Nai, A. (2013). What really matters is which camp goes dirty: Differential effects of negative

campaigning on turnout during Swiss federal ballots: WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS WHICH CAMP

GOES DIRTY. *European Journal of Political Research*, *52*(1), 44–70.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2012.02060.x

Krishnakumar, J., & Müller, T. (2012). The political economy of immigration in a direct

democracy: The case of Switzerland. *European Economic Review*, *56*(2), 174–189.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2011.09.005

Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study

of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, *46*(3),

319–345. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x

Weingartner, D. (2018, June 3). ZÜRICH: Stephen Bannon findet in Zürich lobende Worte für

Christoph Blocher. *Luzerner Zeitung*.

https://www.luzernerzeitung.ch/nachrichten/international/stephen-bannon-lobt-in-zuerich-die-

schweiz-und-ex-chef-donald-trump;art9640,1212400