

An Ever Closer Union?

The Nationalisation of Political Parties in Switzerland, 1991–2015

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forthcoming in: *Swiss Political Science Review*, 2016

Abstract

The contribution of this research note is a systematic description of levels of party nationalisation in Switzerland, using results from the elections to the Swiss National Council between 1991 and 2015. Party nationalisation is understood as the homogeneity of a party's electoral performance and measured using the inverted and standardised Gini index. Our results indicate a trend towards more nationalisation in the Swiss party system over the time period covered, and distinct patterns for single parties. The SVP and the GLP have made big leaps towards stronger nationalisation, with the former closing in on the levels of the SP and the FDP, while the CVP remains a weakly nationalised party, considering its size.

Keywords

Switzerland, political parties, nationalisation, National Council, elections, Gini index

1 Introduction

This research note discusses the nationalisation of political parties in Switzerland, using data from seven federal elections to measure and discuss change and stability. Nationalisation refers to the extent of territorial heterogeneity in electoral results – or, in other words, the distribution of party success across territory (Caramani 2004, Bochsler 2010a). In Switzerland, the politically most relevant territorial units for national elections are the 26 Swiss cantons, which also serve as electoral districts for elections to the National Council and the Council of States (Bernauer and Mueller 2015).

Party nationalisation matters because it has the potential to unify the political preferences of the entire population and support the centralisation of powers (Riker 1964, 181); it affects the political economy (Lago-Peñas and Lago-Peñas 2009; Crisp et al. 2013; Jurado 2014); and it alters the effect of the electoral system (Bochsler 2010c). Thus the political history of Western Europe as one of functional cleavages superseding territorial ones through party nationalisation (Caramani 2004). By contrast, low degrees of party nationalisation, i.e. persistent and systematic diversity in electoral fortunes of different parties in different regions, legitimise decentralised, federal and/or regionalised state structures (Filippov et al. 2004, 180). The best example here is the break-up of Belgian federal parties along linguistic community lines (Maddens and Swenden 2009; Lacey 2014, 68).

However, the debate on causal relations between party nationalisation and state centralisation is far from settled, with some arguing for causality running from institutional structures through party organisation to nationalisation (e.g. Duchacek 1987, 329; Chandler 1987, 151; Harbers 2010) and others arguing the opposite (e.g. Chhibber and Kollman 2004, 223 and 227; Bochsler 2010b, 809–13). In any case, it transpires that valid and reliable measurement is key. Only in this way can we analyse both the reasons and the consequences of different degrees of party nationalisation. This contribution provides such a measure and applies it to National Council elections in Switzerland between 1991 and 2015.

What is more, Switzerland presents a particularly interesting case. On the one hand, its federal and electoral institutions have remained constant since the introduction of proportionality and the fixation of cantons as undivided constituencies in 1919 (Knapp 1986, 34-5).¹ At the same time, the Swiss political system has remained highly decentralised, with both cantons and local governments possessing a wide-range of legislative, executive and fiscal powers (Vatter

¹ Except for the infamously late introduction of the female suffrage in 1971, of course. Also, every once in a while seats in the National Council are redistributed to the cantons to take into account shifting demographics.

2014; Mueller 2015). Political parties too are formally organised in a bottom-up fashion; historically, national parties have grown out of federations of cantonal branches (Gruner 1984). Finally, national and cantonal office-holders have often first served at the cantonal and local level, respectively (Koch et al. 2013), and candidate selection is widely decentralised, too (Mueller 2015, 83-86). All this would favour low degrees of party nationalisation.

On the other hand, however, the Swiss system also provides for what Lacey (2014, 62) calls a “unified and robust voting space” (emphasis omitted), where particularly through direct democracy the people are called to vote on specific policies several times every year. This creates a national space of decision-making and nationalises the political discourse to the extent that deliberators interact horizontally (Tresch 2008) as well as vertically (Stojanovic 2011, 106), that is across cantons and with the federal level. Yet cantonal parties continue to issue vote recommendations that deviate from their federal party (Bochsler and Bousbah 2015; even if less and less; cf. Mueller and Bernauer 2015), and while direct democracy has been in place for over a century², a great many changes in Swiss politics have taken place only over the last few decades. This regards notably the polarisation of actors and a professionalisation of campaigns (Bochsler et al. 2015, Vatter 2014). The media, particularly the most commercialised ones, have also paid more and more attention to executive as opposed to legislative elections, leading Udris et al. (2015, 591) to speak of an increased personalisation and even “presidentialisation”. And even when it comes to electoral results, the recent decades have witnessed more and more unity across the Swiss territory (Armingeon 1998, Bochsler and Sciarini 2006; Bernauer and Mueller 2015). Thus, there are grounds to suspect higher levels of party nationalisation today than before.

In sum, the real-world behaviour of actors (voters and parties) has shown less and less territorial diversity while the institutions (particularly federalism and proportionality) continue to favour fragmentation along both territorial and ideological lines. The role of direct democracy, finally, is ambivalent: having favoured the emergence of a national identity (Stojanovic 2011), it also enables cantonal (party) deviations and contributes to maintaining decentralisation (Mueller et al. 2015). And in several periods, referendums and initiatives have even served to emphasise territorial cleavages, rather than foster unity. The next section places this debate into a wider context and develops specific expectations. Section three presents our method, data and results. Section four discusses these results before we conclude.

² The two most important (and bottom-up) instruments of direct democracy, the optional referendum (challenging an Act of Parliament) and the popular initiative (proposing a partial revision of the Federal Constitution), have existed since 1874 and 1891, respectively.

2 Definition, relevance and expectations

Party nationalisation is a widely debated issue. One of the reasons for this popularity is the fact that the concept lies at the intersection of federalism and multilevel governance, on the one hand, and party politics and political behaviour, on the other. Accordingly, there are different labels, theoretical approaches and methodologies, depending on whether one is interested in the drivers of voting behaviour in a cross-sectional perspective (e.g. Armingeon 1998), comparisons of systemic properties over time and space (e.g. Bochslers and Wasserfallen 2013), or the internal organisation of political parties (e.g. Thorlakson 2007). In this contribution, we define party nationalisation as *the degree to which a party's electoral support is uniformly distributed across a given territory* (cf. also Bochslers 2010a, 155). Hence, a perfectly nationalised party would have exactly the same vote share in all territorial units; and the more territorial variation there is in terms electoral success, the less nationalised that party.

The second reason for the concept's popularity is the flexible use that can be made of it. As organisations between the state and the people, parties are ideally placed to detect changes in either. Increases in overall party nationalisation could thus point towards more state centralisation, with parties mirroring the institutional set-up, and/or an increasing homogeneity in the electorate and its political preferences, which in turn could be due to, for example, the standardisation of media messages and of party campaigns throughout the national territory, or the general disappearance of residence as a factor influencing political preferences. In this contribution we are interested in three different aspects of party nationalisation: party-specific, canton-specific and changes over time.

The *party-specific* focus is concerned with different nationalisation degrees across political parties: Why are some parties more nationalised than others? The literature provides us with different reasons and corresponding hypotheses, which can be complemented with Swiss-specific insights. In essence, this builds on Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who have distinguished different dimensions of political and social cleavages. Functional cleavages – primarily the economic cleavage between the working class and the owners of capital – usually do not mark sharp territorial demarcation lines. Parties organised along this cleavage would thus usually gain a rather homogeneous support across the territory. Other cleavages are by definition territorial: they separate the centre of a country from its periphery or the urban from the rural

areas. The degree of territorialisation of the fourth major cleavage, pitting actors of the secular state against those of the (Catholic) church, depends on the specific context.

In the Swiss case, the religious cleavage has become territorialised through the civil war in 1847 and the subsequent *Kulturkampf* that pitted the Protestant and more liberal city-cantons against the Catholic-conservative cantons of Central Switzerland plus Fribourg and Valais. Hence, with our *canton-specific* focus we aim to detect regional outliers. Why are in some cantons completely different parties the dominant force than in all the others? The Swiss cantons are not only autonomous but also diverse. Some have a Catholic, some a Protestant majority, whereas in Basel-City and Neuchâtel, the plurality group are persons with no confession at all; most are entirely or exclusively German-speaking, some French-speaking, and one each Italian-speaking and trilingual; some are 100% urban, others 100% rural; some are rich, some are poor; some are still very industrialised, others almost entirely reliant on services³. But are there, to paraphrase George Orwell, cantons that are yet more diverse than all the others? More particularly, are the mainly Catholic cantons still that different from the rest of Switzerland? In keeping with the cleavage approach, this should be reflected in relatively lower nationalisation scores for the Christian-Democratic Party (CVP).

However, a cantonal comparison is hampered by two factors: size and electoral system (cf. also Bernauer and Mueller 2015). In fact, while the electoral law for the elections of the first chamber of parliament is nominally the same for all 26 cantons, in effect it differs widely. In 2015, the magnitude of the 26 electoral districts (equal to the 26 cantons) varied between 1 and 35 mandates. Switzerland thus belongs to the countries with the largest variance in district magnitude worldwide. Six cantons elect their National Councillor in a single-seat district, by plurality rule, and only seven out of 26 cantons count at least 10 seats so that they are effectively proportional (Lutz and Selb 2007).

Finally, our *time-specific focus* is interested in the extent of change since 1991, when the transformation of Swiss politics began in the wake of the end of the Cold War and at the start of Europeanisation. The central hypothesis to be tested here is that Switzerland has become an ever closer union. This means that overall party nationalisation has increased despite both party- and canton-specific peculiarities.

³ Cf. “Regional comparison of selected indicators (Cantons)”, Federal Office of Statistics, at <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/en/index/regionen/kantone/daten.html> (last accessed 8 January 2016).

3 Method, data and results

The empirical analysis is based on the election results for the National Council of Switzerland (first chamber), from 1991 to 2015, aggregated to the level of cantons. To measure party nationalisation, we need to tackle several methodological challenges. First, any measure of territorial (in)variance requires a valid definition of parties. While this is trivial in many other countries, Switzerland stands out by virtue of the fact that it lacks any party law or party register, and parties have grown as loose federations of cantonal groups. In the period of investigation, the Radical-Liberals (*Freisinnig-Demokratische Partei*, FDP) have merged with the smaller, and only regionally present Liberal Party (*Liberale Partei der Schweiz*, LPS), although while being united nationally, in two cantons (Vaud and Basel-City) they have conserved their separate party organisations and compete against each other. Other examples include the CVP and the Christian Social Party (CSP) – in some cantons organised as a faction of the Christian Democrats, in others (like Obwalden) completely independent – , or the Green party, which has developed as a federation of various local or cantonal ecological movements and proto-parties.⁴ For our party classification, we thus follow the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics in collaboration with the Centre for Democracy Studies in Aarau,⁵ which in turn rely on information obtained from cantonal party branches.

Second, while Switzerland is usually treated as a country with proportional representation in the National Council, a number of cantons elects the parliament in very small districts. In single-seat cantons, only the largest parties are meaningful competitors. When a party decides not to run with a candidate in a canton, it is assigned a vote share of 0 in this canton. In the rare instances of tacit elections, we proceed accordingly, assigning a vote share of 0 to parties which did not run and 100% to the party winning the seat, with a fictitious turnout equal to the country's average that year.

Third and finally, we need to calculate a measure of the degree to which political parties rely on regional strongholds, or whether they gain similar vote shares across the whole territory. The calculation of our standardised party nationalisation score is based on an (inverted) Gini index of inequality, where unequal support across the territory is considered as inequality (Bochsler 2010a). Hence, parties gaining all their votes in a single canton are assigned low

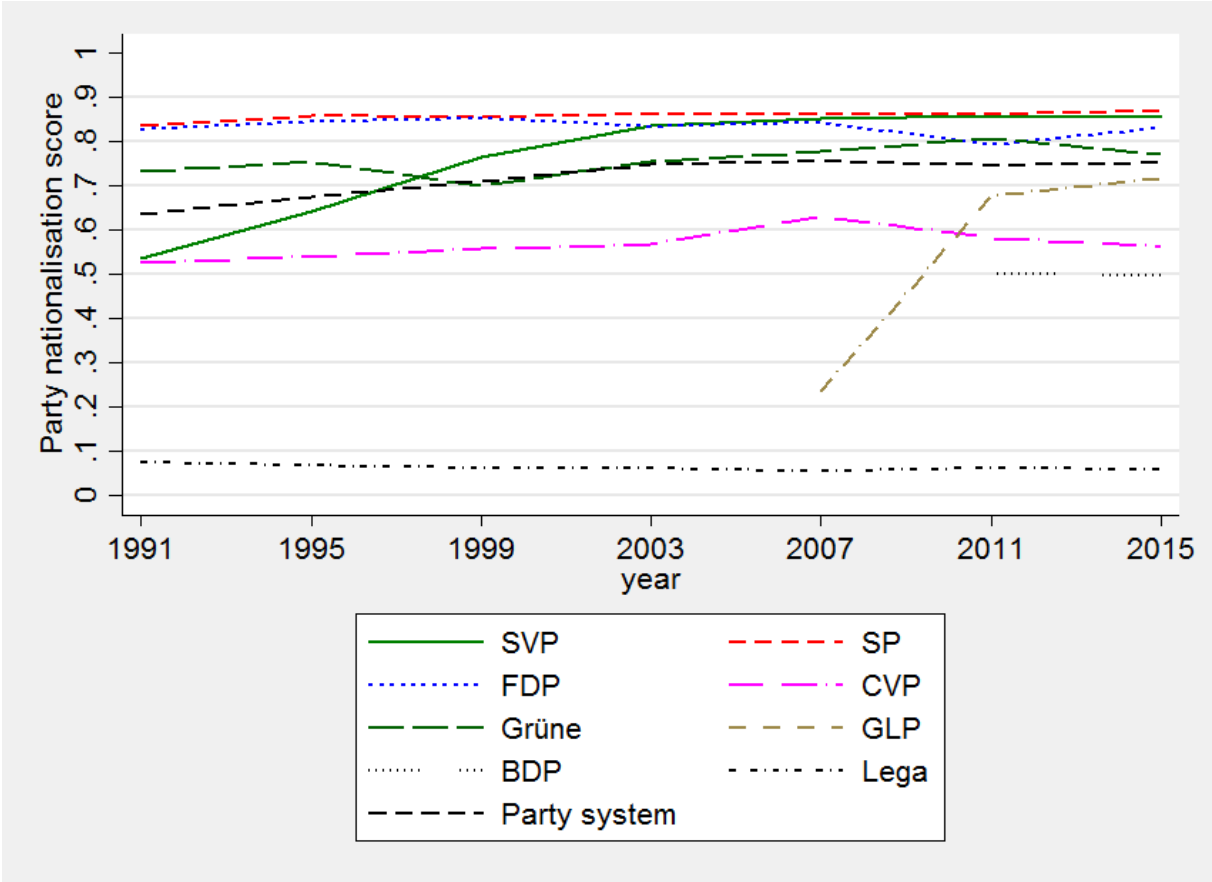
⁴ Still today, in the Swiss capital Bern, four to five Green parties co-exist, ranging from a split-off of the Radicals (*Grüne Freie Liste*) to a group with marxist-leninist provenance (*Grünes Bündnis*), a dogmatic ecological left-wing party (*Grüne Partei Bern*), a young movement (*Junge Alternative*), the de facto youth wing of the *Grünes Bündnis*, and finally, since 2007, an ecologically oriented right-wing party (*Grünliberale Partei*) (Seitz, 2008; Bochsler and Wasserfallen, 2013).

⁵ <http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/17/02.html> (last accessed 3 January 2016).

values close to 0, whereas parties with a similar vote share across the country are assigned values closer to 1. The standardised version of the index accounts for the very unequal sizes of the cantons and is comparable to other countries, where the number of territorial units is different.

Figure 1 shows the party nationalisation scores for the main parties in Switzerland at each National Council election from 1991 to 2015. The score for the party system as such is a weighted measure calculated from the individual party scores. We see that the largest parties – the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), the Socialists (SP), the FDP, and the CVP – are all located in the upper part of the scale, although the CVP is clearly the least nationalised because its support concentrated mainly on the Catholic majority cantons. The most important change in the period of investigation was the rise of the national-conservative SVP, which was connected to the party’s expansion into all Swiss cantons, and which accordingly brought a substantial increase in its level of nationalisation.

Figure 1: Party nationalisation in Switzerland, 1991–2015



The rise of the Swiss People's Party is closely linked to a programmatic and territorial transformation of the party: programmatically, the party could profit from the new cultural conflict in Swiss politics (Kriesi 2015) on the GAL-TAN issue dimension.⁶ Since the late 1980s, the former centrist party of farmers and shopkeepers has gradually taken over the leadership of a new nationalist-conservative pole, which is opposed to integration in international and supranational organisations (EU and UN) and immigration and which defends traditionalist cultural values (Kriesi et al. 2006; Bornschier 2015). While until the 1990s, the party was only present in protestant and agricultural cantons and strongest in the German-speaking parts of the country, the transformation to a new nationalist-conservative party of the right was spearheaded by the Zurich branch of the party. New cantonal branches were set up in catholic cantons (where the party was previously not present), followed by intense internal struggles and the re-orientation of traditional cantonal branches and, since the 2000s, the move towards the French-speaking cantons.

Nevertheless, in the French- and especially the Italian-speaking parts, the party is still less successful, as even in the most recent elections of October 2015, its main gains can be attributed to the German-speaking cantons. This can partly be explained by the somehow more favourable view of European integration held by French-speaking electorates (although the differences between the linguistic regions have declined, see Kriesi et al. 1996), and partly by political leadership, which remains dominated by German-speakers. Also, in Ticino (where most Italian-speakers live) and in Geneva (one of the six French-speaking cantons) many positions of the Swiss People's Party are represented by the *Lega dei Ticinesi* (Lega) and the *Mouvement citoyens genevois* (MCG), respectively, which operate exclusively at the regional level. Both parties have resisted the attempts of the SVP to either challenge their local dominance in the anti-migration camp or absorb them altogether. In the course of its rise, the Swiss People's Party has also incorporated large parts of the personnel and voters of several other small parties of the nationalist-conservative camp, especially the Freedom Party of Switzerland (earlier the Car Party), as well as the Swiss Democrats. As the two were present in similar cantons as the SVP, this has brought the SVP new voters, but it has not altered the territorial variance of the SVP's support to a major degree.

Thus, except for the somehow lower ratings in the French- and Italian-speaking parts, the SVP has now a widely nationalised electorate. And after a split of a small group of more

⁶ GAL stands for Green, Alternative, Libertarian; TAN for Traditional, Authoritarian and Nationalist.

moderate politicians (who dominated the party until the 1990s) in 2008, the party takes countrywide widely homogeneous positions.

Furthermore, in the long-run the Swiss People's Party threatens the predominance of the Christian Democrats in their traditional Catholic strongholds (cf. also Bochsler 2013). In referenda, the SVP could already gain considerable support for its key issues (non-integration in Europe and anti-immigration) in rather rural and conservative Catholic regions. And with the establishment of new party branches in Catholic cantons, the SVP has also organisationally penetrated deeply into the Christian-Democratic territory. The Christian Democrats without a doubt remains a party which gains most of its support in its traditional strongholds – however, it is under heavy pressure by the SVP even there.

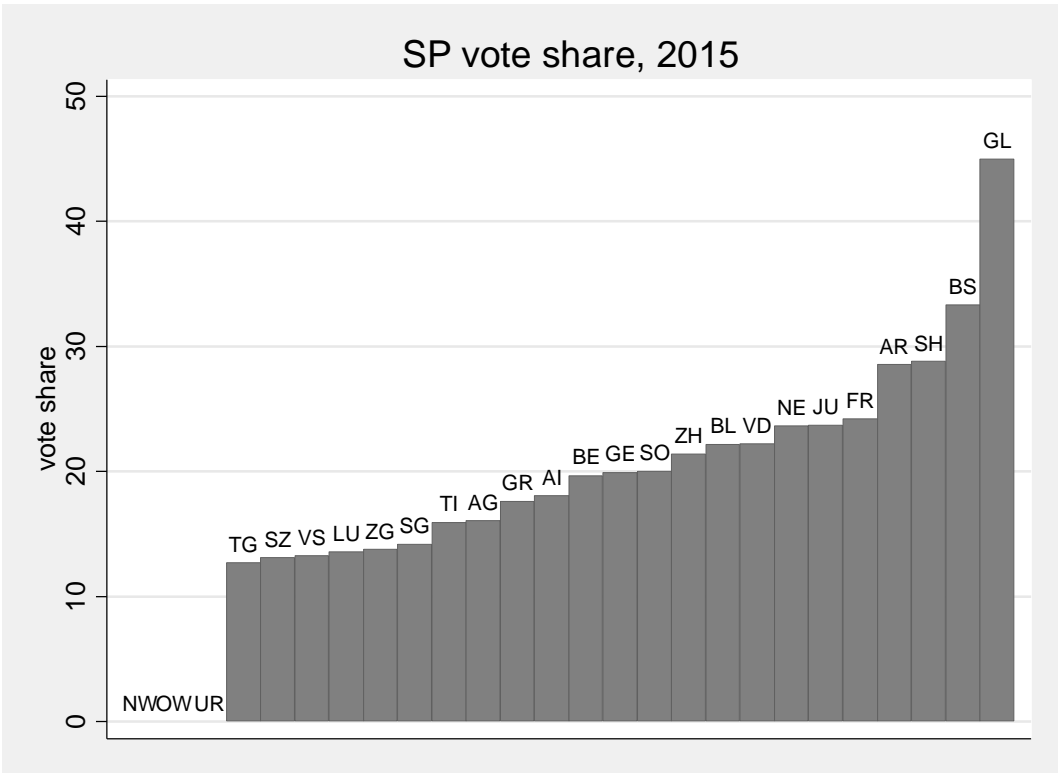
The two other large parties, the SP and the FDP, are formed along functional cleavages, i.e. mainly the economic left-right cleavage, which typically does not follow territorial lines as hypothesised above. In catholic cantons, the FDP also captures the more secular voters, so that they are equally represented in the Christian Democratic strongholds. Thus, the FDP has historically had a rather nationalised structure. In 2009, the Liberal-Radicals merged with the much smaller but programmatically similar Liberal Party, which used to be represented almost exclusively in a few French-speaking cantons and Basel-City, so that the regional version of the Liberals has disappeared⁷, leading to an even more nationalised structure of the party system.

The other, smaller parties possess a much less homogeneous representation throughout the country. The Green Liberals are represented almost exclusively in the rather urbanised cantons of the German-speaking part; the BDP in protestant, rather rural and German-speaking cantons. The Green party has a wider territorial coverage, but faces difficulties in several small cantons, especially where restrictive electoral systems for national (and sometimes also for cantonal) elections reduce competition to the benefit mainly of the largest parties (Selb and Pituctin 2010; Bernauer and Mueller 2015). Yet smaller parties such as the above-mentioned Lega, the MCG, the Christian Social Party of Obwalden (not to be confounded with the *national* Christian Social Party) exist, although they gain parliamentary representation only in single cantons. Small parties represented in the national parliament with somehow more national aspirations, although with their votes concentrated mainly on a few strongholds, include the Evangelic People's Party (EVP) and the Communist Party (PdA).

⁷ Although in two cantons, Basel-City and Vaud, the previous LPS has transformed into a largely autonomous cantonal branch within the FDP, see above.

Thus, with the decline of the Christian-Democrats and the nationalisation of the Swiss People’s Party, overall territorial variance in Swiss elections has declined over the past decades, but remained roughly stable since 2011 (Bochsler, Gerber and Zumbach, forthcoming). Of the four parties currently in federal government, the SP – the main advocate of standardisation, egalitarianism and thus centralisation (Mueller 2015) – has consistently been the most nationalised party, while the CVP – the traditional defender of the Catholic-conservative cantonal minority – has equally consistently been the least nationalised party.

Figure 2: Vote share of the Social Democratic Party in 2015, by canton

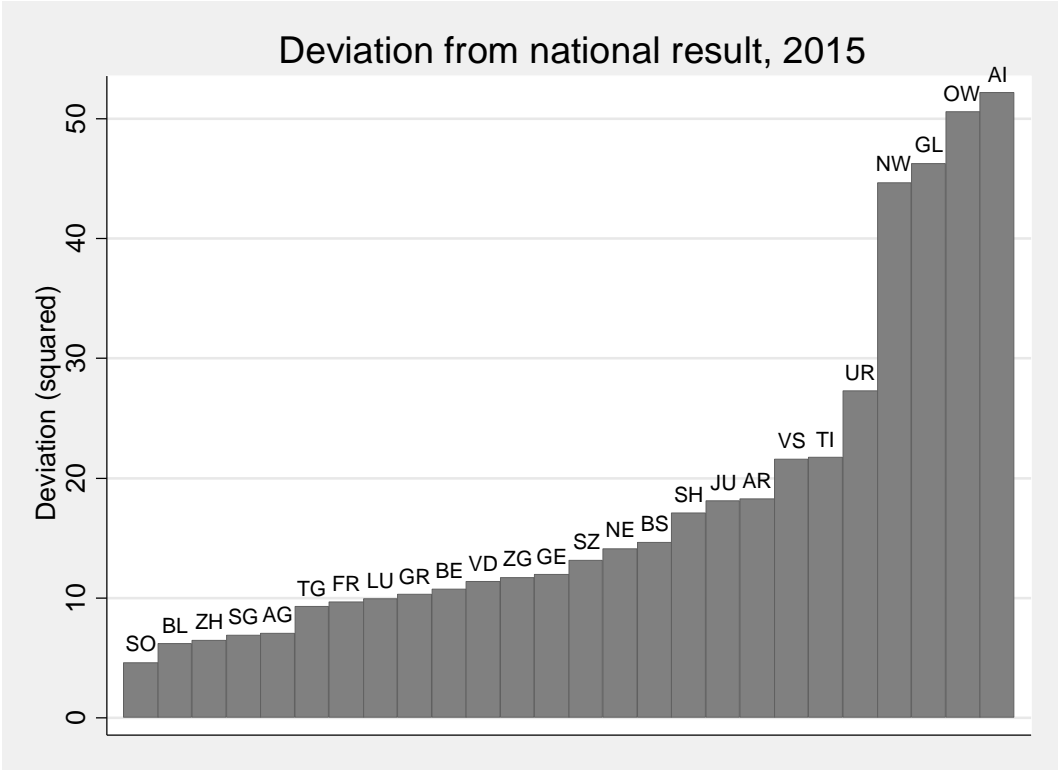


However, even in the case of the most nationalised SP, a comparison of its cantonal results in 2015 still shows quite some variance (Figure 2). There are two main reasons for this. The first is cleavage-based: The party tends to gain more support in urban (e.g. BS, GE, ZH) and French-speaking cantons (FR, JU, NE, VD, GE) than in rural and/or German-speaking cantons. On the other hand, the very small cantons, with only one or two mandates (SH, JU, UR, OW, NW, GL, AR, AI), are persistent outliers, as the electoral result relies on a very restricted field of competitors and strategic effects. Therefore, the electoral result for the very same parties tends to fluctuate massively between cantonal and national elections (Bochsler

and Wasserfallen 2013) as well as between subsequent elections. So the cantons themselves continue to matter, but only a more systematic analysis can reveal the relative impact of technical and structural factors present *within* the cantons (cf. also Bernauer and Mueller).

This is also summarised in our third part of the analysis, where we have calculated how much the National Council election results in each canton deviate from the national average. Therefore, we have calculated for each canton a score which measures the difference between the election results in the canton from the national mean. The measure is based on Gallagher’s (1991) index of disproportionality, i.e. on the sum of the squared deviations. Again, cantons with one or two mandates score very highly. The only exceptions, with high deviations despite only medium-sized district magnitude, are Ticino (TI), due to the Lega (see above), and Valais (VS), a traditional and persistent stronghold of the CVP.⁸

Figure 3: Deviation of cantonal election results from national average, 2015



4 Discussion and Conclusion

This research note has centred on the concept of party nationalisation, which measures the homogeneity of a party’s electoral results across territorial units of a polity. Nationalised parties are often regarded as a requirement for strong centralised government, and levels of

⁸ The results look very similar for the entire period of 1991 to 2015.

nationalisation interact for instance with electoral systems in creating outcomes such as electoral proportionality. For varying reasons, such as lacking consolidation of political systems, regionalised media systems, fractionalised party organisation, mobilisation on territorially shaped issues, societal diversity, or institutional factors (e.g. federalism or proportionality), nationalisation can be low for single parties or even whole party systems.

Switzerland is a classic example of a system where historical, institutional and political conditions have enabled also less nationalised parties to play a role. However, changes in the media system (concentration, commercialisation and personalisation) as well as an increasing polarisation of the party system, associated most notably with the rise of the SVP, have created questions about how this affects party nationalisation. Thus we have investigated Swiss parties' varying levels of nationalisation as well as some of the temporal trends involved. Methodologically, this research note relies on an inverted Gini index of party nationalisation, with a limit of 1 for perfectly nationalised parties and approaching 0 for heterogeneous cases.

Covering elections to the Swiss National Council between 1991 and 2015, a number of observations can be made. *First*, there is a moderate trend towards higher levels of nationalisation at the level of the party system. The rise occurred in the first period investigated here, that is between 1991 and 2003, but has remained rather stable since. *Second*, this trend is not driven by a uniform development across all parties, as mainly the SVP (as well as the GLP) have made big leaps, while other parties remain at relatively high (SP and FDP), relatively low (CVP) or extremely low (Lega) levels of nationalisation. *Third*, even the most nationalised Swiss parties have some variance in the distribution of their electoral results across territorial units – in particular as some Cantons only send one MP to the National Council.

Where does all this leave us with regard to the wider debate? There are two avenues of research for which our findings would seem to be relevant. On the one hand, from a perspective of territorial politics, decentralised party systems are essential to the guarantee of a federal division of labour (e.g. Riker 1964). Increasing party nationalisation could thus be read as either a consequence or a cause of a more centralised political system. To test this relationship in a comparative perspective, the literature has matched the shifts in party system nationalisation (or equivalent: regionalist party support) with data on government centralisation, and looked at the party positions regarding regionalism and at separatist claims (cf. Heller 2002; Chhibber and Kollman 2004, 223 and 227; Brancati 2006; Bochsler 2010b, 809–13; Harbers 2010; Toubeau & Massetti 2013; Lublin 2012).

On the other hand, political preferences tend to cluster in territorial spaces, and political behaviour is influenced by the spatial context, in turn. This is the observation of the literature on social cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan 1967), but also of studies on the spatial context of elections (Wright 1977; Weakliem 1997, etc.). For the Swiss case, Christmann & Salamina (2013) have analysed contextual effects on voting behaviour, relying on both aggregated and individual data. In Switzerland, the increase in the nationalisation of political parties is symptomatic for the change of political cleavages. Thus, the territory-based cleavage, separating protestant from catholic-conservative positions, is increasingly losing in importance to the benefit of the GAL-TAN issue dimension, which is less strongly territorially structured.

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