

Multilingual Democracy: Switzerland and Beyond

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Two main insights will have been gained after reading this book, one each for activists and academics. First, it is not always necessary for a democracy to become multinational so as to remain multicultural. Instead, given the right mix of political institutions, even deep cultural differences can be reconciled with an overarching sense of togetherness and ensuing stability. Second, although often cited as a prime example of a successful consociation, Switzerland in fact owes much of its political success to centripetal institutions. What seems paradoxical at first – that stable, peaceful power-sharing between a linguistic majority and several minorities comes about via majoritarian devices such as referendums and plurality voting – really forms the heart of Nenad Stojanović's enquiry: “in the light of other Western multilingual democracies that have experienced and still experience significant centrifugal tendencies (see Canada/Quebec, Spain/Catalonia, Belgium/Flanders)”, what explains “the extraordinary stability and cohesion of the Swiss multilingual democracy” (p. 18)?

The book has three parts which cover the conceptual, institutional, and comparative approaches to answering that question. Over a total of 11 substantive chapters, the reader thus learns to distinguish between plurilingual, moderately and deeply multilingual societies, for instance (p. 4 f.): Only Switzerland, Belgium and Canada are classified into the last group since there is no lingua franca as in the second type (e.g. Castilian, in Spain) and most citizens are monolingual (unlike, for instance, in Luxembourg which is plurilingual). Equally enriching are the various histories of elections to and compositions of the Swiss Federal Council (chapters 7 and 8) and both parliamentary chambers (chapter 6). Turns out a proportional representation of different groups in central institutions is possible also without proportional electoral systems. Indeed, German-speakers were a governmental minority only once, between 1917 and 1920 – just when the National Council was about to switch to proportional elections (p. 119). The reason the type of the electoral system is immaterial to the presence of the four official language groups at central level is of course their territorial concentration.

Next to the electoral system, the other institution to take centre-stage in this book is direct democracy. Chapters 4 and 5 (as well as 11) analyse its effects on the political cohesion of deeply multilingual societies at both federal and cantonal level (Bern, Fribourg, Grisons, and Valais) using quantitative as well as qualitative methods. If chapters 2 and 3 form the prelude – asking, respectively: what is a multinational country and what kind of democracy is Switzerland? – chapters 4 to 8 deliver the main course in showing what makes this multilingual but mononational country work. Direct democracy is indeed *the* key to understanding Swiss national cohesion despite linguistic diversity, for four reasons (p. 66): popular initiatives and optional referendums enable minorities “to have a voice in national politics”; actual referendum results constitute “obstacles to the emergence of (divisive) ethnolinguistic discourses

based on stereotypes”; frequent voting on identical issues throughout the country “fosters the emergence of a common demos” (vertical effect); and campaigning before a referendum “produces centripetal effects across language borders” because all individual – and cantonal, if a double majority is required – votes matter equally (horizontal effect). This is by far the most original contribution this oeuvre makes to the literature.

The evidence on the beneficial (from the point of view of linguistic groups, especially minorities) effect of both majoritarian electoral systems and supposedly minorities-averse direct democracy constitutes a formidable attack on widely shared consociational premises. These have held, amongst others, that only the formal recognition of groups *as groups* and their inclusion in government via mono-lingual parties competing in as-proportional-as-possible elections leads to peaceful coexistence. Neither condition has ever been present, in Switzerland, yet coexistence has remained peaceful.

Chapters 9 and 10 take us further still in our quest to understand the complex connections between political institutions, individuals, groups, language(s) and democracy. First, the Swiss experience is used creatively to amend a Belgian reform proposal in view of creating anew what no fewer than six state reforms have hollowed out: the sense of togetherness. Second, the EU also gets its fair share of advice: take seriously the multilingual character of your transnational Europarties lest the different parts of your polity will forever remain just that. Part 3 of the book thus nicely illustrates yet another use that can be made of the Swiss case, next to falsifying and refining existing concepts and theories (part 1) and opening it up both temporally and spatially, through historical and sub-national analyses, and thus gaining in empirical and causal leverage (part 2).

At the end of the day, while 11 chapters might seem a lot and a few have already been published in one form or the other over the span of 15 years, the voyage through all of them is a light, eventful and pleasant one. Similarly so, descending from abstract concepts and debates between some far-off theorists down to the Swiss federal level and its nation-building blocks, ending with the mayor of Surpierre FR, and ascending back up again via Bern to Brussels and the Lisbon Treaty can cause dizziness. That the concluding chapter 11 is much more than just a conclusion and instead yet another nail in the consociational coffin – at least as regards Switzerland and its language groups – provides no resting ground on which to pause and breathe either. Perhaps also more could have been done to better join the different chapters into a coherent whole: develop the theory first, then apply it to Switzerland in all its facets, institutions, time periods, and territorial arenas. Yet then again, Switzerland itself thrives precisely on its richness, complexity, history, diversity, and constant tension – or dialogue – between its various components. And the central thesis is indeed pursued throughout the book: that some political institutions are better able to help citizens feel connected both to each other and to some greater community despite significant inter-personal and inter-group differences.

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