



Multi-lingual Democracy: Switzerland and Beyond

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Note

1. J. J. P. Wouters, *Vernacular Politics in Northeast India: Democracy, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

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Multi-lingual Democracy: Switzerland and Beyond, written by Nenad Stojanović, London: ECPR Press, Rowman and Littlefield, 2021. ISBN HB 978-1-78552-331-1

This is an excellent book that combines theoretical discussion with closely argued and detailed analysis of one case, Switzerland, that generates many internal and over-time comparisons. The reader will learn much about multi-lingual societies, power-sharing, and the wide range of ways it can be achieved. The book is closely argued and it makes strong claims about democracy in plural places

In the first part, the author shows – convincingly to this reader – that Switzerland is a multi-lingual democracy, not a multi-national democracy. His argument is focused on multi-lingual democracies and how they can function. He is uncertain what democracy might look like in multi-national states if indeed it can function at all there. Indeed he argues that UK and Spain are plurinational, by which he means that the constituent nations are nested, such that democracy can take place both at the lower and higher levels.

In the second part of the book, Stojanović argues that Switzerland’s power-sharing forms of government are not consociational but are centripetal. A power-sharing outcome is achieved in most of the Swiss democratic arenas without the consociational mechanisms of grand coalitions, group vetoes, or proportional representation, and without the consociational norm of group rights. Indeed there are cases and periods where proportional power sharing is not achieved (an intermittent underrepresentation of Italian speakers is outlined in some detail). For Stojanović, the fact that this is not immediately remedied proves the point that the system is not consociational. He argues that the electoral mechanisms, for the most part, accord with centripetal recommendations – large constituencies and multi-lingual party systems that incentivize parties to seek support from all groups.

The detailed arguments and evidence go against some contemporary wisdom and provide much material for further analysis and discussion. For example, Stojanović argues that direct democracy in referenda – when issues are initiated from the bottom up, not top-down – tends to undermine prejudices and does not work against minorities because each linguistic group is in fact split on most issues, and parties look for cross-cantonal allies for their position. He also argues that majoritarian electoral systems in small electoral districts (where minorities are territorially distinct) is an appropriate way to represent small linguistic

groups, indeed he shows that switching to PR didn't significantly change the representation of minorities.


What stands out to this reader are the radically varied methods used for different types of elections in different cantons and parts of cantons. The challenging complexity of the systems is mirrored sometimes in the exposition (most of these chapters were originally articles in specialized journals, now adapted and updated). This can make it difficult to see the wood for the trees. But the book reveals some of the patterns that make the Swiss case distinctive. The linguistic difference is largely but not totally territorially concentrated. Politics builds on cross-cutting party and linguistic cleavages. Parties themselves are multi-lingual. Democracy takes place in multiple different arenas with different methods of voting and different outcomes. Citizens understand the multiple systems (at least the ones they are involved in) and the differential incentives offered to voters. Stojanović argues that Switzerland, at least in the Federal Council elections, has successfully achieved the system of concordance (a form of power-sharing) for parties, and more or less for linguistic groups. This latter, he argues later in the book, is in part because of the multi-lingual parties themselves, such that the parties have strong incentives to win votes from all constituencies.

In the canton of Berne, however, a different formula is used that Stojanović sees as close to, but still distinct from, consociation. This "geometric mean" for reserve seats involves elections for territorial representatives that differentially weight voting, such that voters' preferences in the area to be represented are given more weight than votes in the wider arena. This simultaneously meets two norms – it means that a canton-wide majority cannot override necessarily override territorially-based minorities and it ensures that the representatives are representatives of the whole society not simply of the territorial minority. This understanding neatly refuses the binary of consociational power-sharing vs integrative majority rule.

Fascinating questions are raised at several times in the book but not – at least for this reader – convincingly answered, as to how the sometimes challenging and problematic outcomes (for example the underrepresentation of Italian speakers) are dealt with so that over time the outcomes are not seen as unfair. Is it simply the electoral system? Or when do parties and the public turn their attention to the issues? How far does local complexity (for example, as Stojanović notes, a particular candidate's bilingualism) ameliorate the seeming problems of the system? And how far is the distinctive institutional history important to the expectations and anticipations of parties and voters? Stojanović notes that to do justice to history would require another book. But I think these questions of expectations and anticipations – and the historical and local cultures that may inform them – are relevant to the discussion of the electoral mechanisms and incentives. How mechanisms, function always depends on context and sequence, and equally this affects how far success in one context is transferable to another.

The third and final section of the book considers whether parts of the Swiss system are in principle transferable to two other multi-lingual democracies – Belgium and the EU. I am not sure if the argument works here because each is not just multi-lingual but also multi-national. This means that the incentives to adopt Swiss types of institutions – eg multi-lingual parties with strong local connections – are weak both for parties and for the citizens themselves, and may well be outweighed by competing national interests. And the EU, as Stojanović well argues, has developed parties without a mass base, formed by elite bargaining not bottom-up evolution. Perhaps this would make it easier for parties to respond to incentives to change, but it is far from clear that the institutions could easily incorporate a more participatory party system.

And yet, the very diversity and multiplicity of the Swiss system offers ideas to those in nationally divided polities. The strength of Stojanović's work lies in his clarity that desired outcomes – eg protection of minorities, power sharing in divided places – can be achieved by a range of different mechanisms across different constituencies. It follows that consociational institutions of government – in Belgium or in Northern Ireland – may be irreplaceable, but this does not mean that consociational principles (group rights) should dominate all politics. It suggests an additive approach to political systems, not so much attempting to remodel existing parties but offering alternative ways to politicize and decide issues where the parties themselves are divided: this would provide a new layer to politics which might or might not grow. I find intriguing Stojanović's defense of the referendum as a democratic tool and potentially protective of minorities, particularly when the issues are introduced from the bottom up. Again for Northern Ireland, consider issues of abortion, health care, European links, climate, pandemics: providing for alternative deliberative forums, and ultimately perhaps for bottom-up referenda, would invite citizens to participate democratically in different and less polarized ways. Such an additive approach appears relevant to the EU, perhaps Belgium, and if not to presently-divided Northern Ireland perhaps to a possible future united Ireland.

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