

Party, Regional and Linguistic Proportionality Under Majoritarian Rules: Swiss Federal Council Elections

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Abstract: *The elections to the Swiss Federal Council in December 2015 re-established a system of party-centred concordance, cherished in consociational theory, consisting of two representatives of the Swiss People's Party, two Radicals, two Social Democrats and one Christian Democrat. At the same time, the government has rarely been as unbalanced in terms of the representation of Switzerland's languages and regions. The article analyses the concept of concordance with regard to both aspects of governmental inclusiveness. It also highlights the crucial role of electoral rules used in governmental elections. It argues that they resemble the Alternative Vote, a majoritarian electoral system that has been criticized in consociational theory but prescribed by the rival, centripetalist approach to power sharing.*

KEYWORDS: Government, Switzerland, concordance, consociationalism, centripetalism, electoral systems

1. Introduction¹

The 2015 elections to the Swiss executive (the Federal Council), an increasingly salient and mediatized moment in the politics of Switzerland (Udris, Lucht and Schneider 2015), followed the established procedure. On 9 December, the joint session of Parliament (the United Federal Assembly) re-elected the six incumbent federal councillors, individually and in the first round of each election, with a very high number of votes. As for the vacant, seventh seat in the executive,² the Swiss People's Party (SVP/UDC) proposed three candidates, one from each language group. Guy Parmelin, a French speaker from Vaud, was elected in the third round with 138 out of 237 valid votes. So the government is now composed of two SVP members, two Radicals (FDP/PLR), two Social Democrats (SP/PS) and one Christian Democrat (CVP/PDC).

¹ I thank Donald Horowitz, Hanspeter Kriesi, Claudio Kuster, Lukas Leuzinger, Sean Mueller and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Anja Giudici, Julianne Funk and Lea Portmann.

² On 28 October 2015, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf handed in her resignation from the government (effective 1 January 2016). She had been elected in December 2007 as a non-official candidate of the SVP. From mid-2008 onwards, she represented the newly founded Conservative ("Bourgeois") Democratic Party, BDP/PBD (see Church and Vatter 2009).

Therefore, we can say that the “system of concordance”, an important element of Swiss consensus and consociational³ democracy, has worked (Kriesi 1995, §7.3; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008, §5.3; Linder 2010, §4.1; Vatter 2014, §5.2). This is manifest in the fact that all but one parliamentary group officially supported the six incumbent candidates.⁴ Furthermore, the SVP once again received a second seat in the executive. The “new” Magic Formula (Batt 2005; Vatter 2008, 11) – introduced in December 2003, when Christoph Blocher (SVP) replaced the incumbent Ruth Metzler (CVP), and terminated in 2007/2008 – has thus been re-established.

In this article, I shall address three issues related to the 2015 governmental elections and beyond. In Section 2, I examine the new composition of the Federal Council in order to see to what extent it follows the idea of party-centred proportionality that is inherent in the system of concordance created in December 1959 (Reber 1979; Steiner 1982; Burgos, Mazzoleni and Rayner 2011). I then, in Section 3, focus on one aspect that plays a subsidiary but nonetheless important role in governmental elections: the use and abuse of linguistic and regional criteria for the selection and election of candidates. Section 4 highlights the rules that frame the elections to the Federal Council. I argue that they come close to a specific variant of the majoritarian electoral system (the Alternative Vote). I also advance the thesis that such a system – criticized by consociationalists but prescribed by the rival, centripetalist approach – has favoured the emergence of the Magic Formula and its stability over time.

2. A fair representation of parties and political blocs?

It is often underlined that Swiss governmental parties have an exceptionally large majority in the Federal Assembly (e.g., Kriesi and Trechsel 2008, 76; Vatter 2014, 209, Figure 5.3). For the record, as of 1 January 2016⁵ the four governmental parties have 211 out of 246 seats in the Federal Assembly (85.8%) and even more (218 seats; 88.6%) if we include the MPs from other, smaller parties who have joined a parliamentary group led by a governmental party. What is often forgotten, however, is that the remaining parties usually also support candidates from the governmental parties (and, thus, can hardly be called “the opposition”). In December 2015, this was true for the BDP (8 seats) and the Green Liberals (7 seats). Taken together, on 9 December 2015 the four-party Federal Council was supported by 10 parties and one independent MP totalling 233 seats (94.7%) in the Federal Assembly. Opposition came only from the Greens and one MP from the radical left, but even they supported all official candidates apart from the SVP candidates (see footnote 4).⁶ If Switzerland were not one of the oldest democracies, such a “Bulgarian majority” (to borrow a term popular in Italian politics) would raise a few eyebrows in any

³ Consensus and consociational democracy are not synonyms but closely related (see Vatter 2008, 7). For the purposes of the present article, the distinction is less important, because power sharing in the executive is an important element in both concepts.

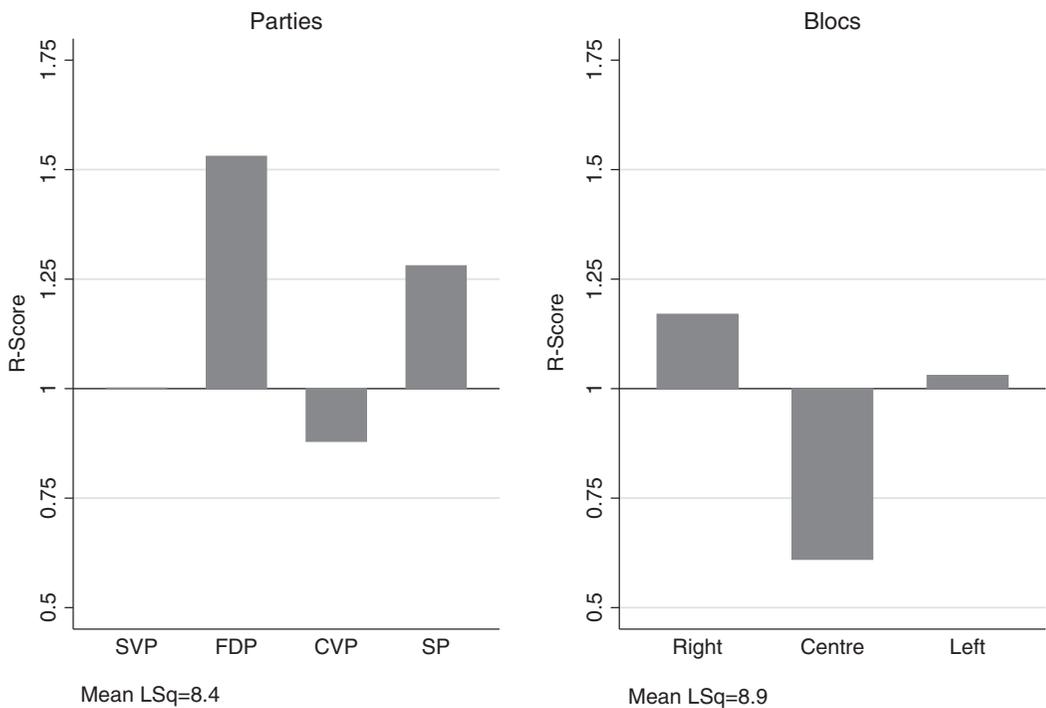
⁴ See the minutes (*Official Bulletin*) of the United Federal Assembly, 9 December 2015. Only the Green parliamentary group (composed of 12 Greens and one MP from the radical-left *Parti du Travail*) decided not to vote for any SVP candidate.

⁵ The general election (i.e., the “complete electoral renewal”; *Gesamterneuerungswahl*) of the Federal Council takes place in the second week of December, every four years, following the parliamentary elections. However, any newly elected federal councillor is typically an official member of government only as of 1 January the following year.

⁶ In reality, not all MPs followed the announced endorsements by political parties: the six incumbent ministers received an average of 198 votes out of 245, or 80.8%. (Urs Gasche, an MP from the BDP, was absent that day.)

Figure 1: Disproportionality and representation of parties and blocs in the Federal Council (2016–2019).

R-Scores 2016–2019 (actual)



Note: In relation to percentages in the Federal Assembly.

democratic audience. Indeed, no other democracy can claim to have such an ample consensus with regard to the composition of the executive (Armingeon 1999, 468).

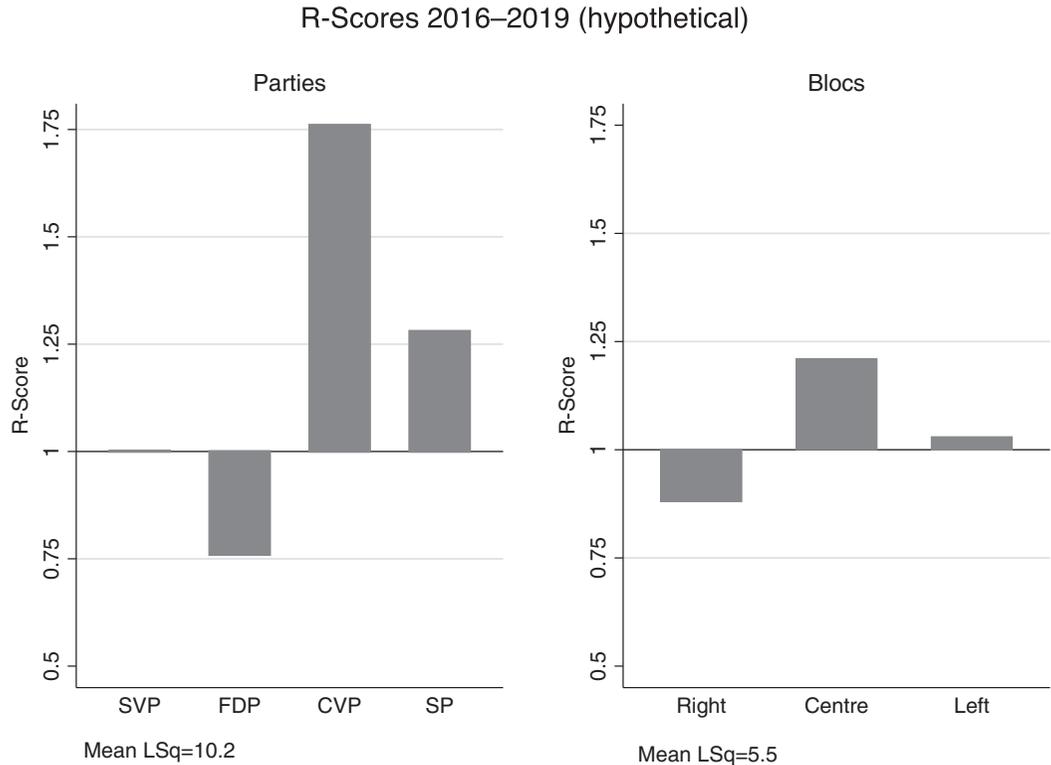
We shall now take a closer look at the composition of the new Federal Council. Has the (arithmetic⁷) concordance been re-established? According to one reading, it has. The three stongest parties have received two seats each, while the remaining seat has been given to the fourth, smaller party.⁸ But not all political actors agree with this definition of concordance. For the Social Democrats and the Greens, concordance implies that the three main political *blocs* – the left, the centre and the right – are represented fairly, such that the left (SP and Greens) receives two, the centre (CVP, BDP and Green Liberals) two and the right (FDP and SVP) three seats.⁹ This implies that the two parties of the right bloc, with four seats, are currently overrepresented, as this gives them the majority in the executive without having it in Parliament (see Figure 1).

⁷ There is also a “political” interpretation of concordance. It is said to regard consensual decision-making within government and respect for collegiality (Bochsler and Sciarini 2006, 106-8; see also Batt 2005). I find this terminology misleading, though, as the “arithmetic” concordance is clearly also a product of political struggles (see the emergence of the Magic Formula in the 1950s; Seidl 2003; Altermatt 2009).

⁸ Some scholars and politicians take the seats in the National Council, elected mostly by PR, as their reference. I follow Altermatt (2015a, my translation), who underlines that “the parliamentarians of the United Federal Assembly and not the National Council percentages elect the federal councillors”.

⁹ See declarations by the speakers of the SP and the Greens in the minutes (*Official Bulletin*) of the Federal Assembly, 9 December 2015.

Figure 2: Disproportionality and representation of parties and blocs in the Federal Council (2016–2019; hypothetical).



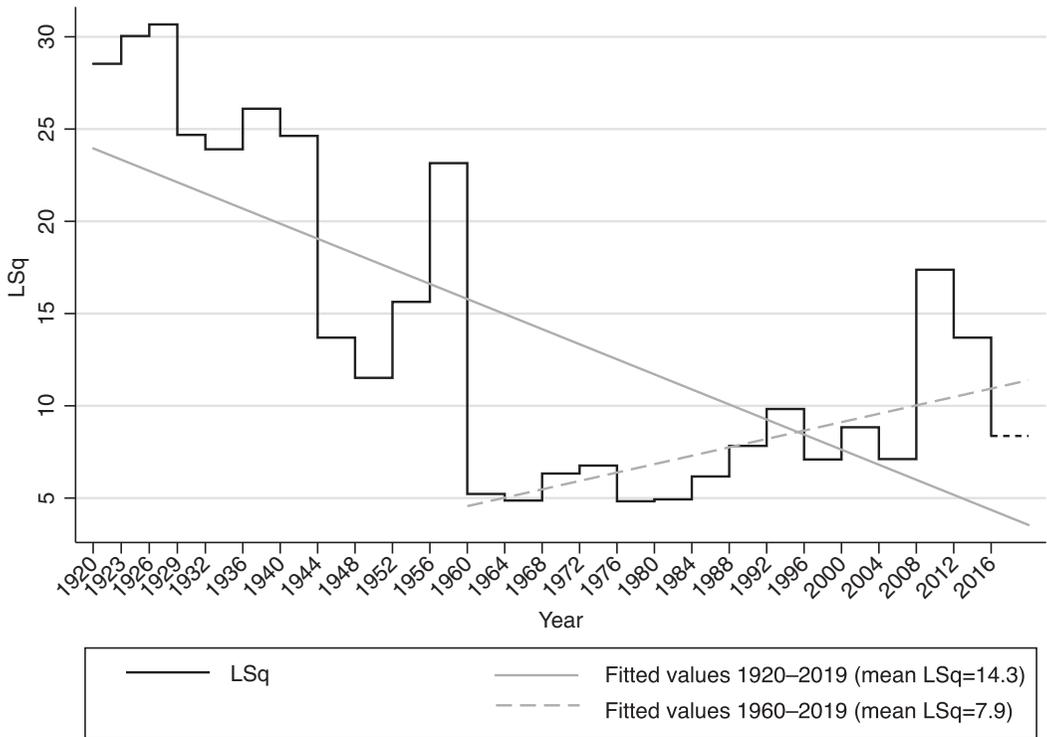
Note: In relation to percentages in the Federal Assembly.

Figure 1 shows that according to the party-centred definition of concordance, the SVP is now perfectly represented in the Federal Council: its representation score (R-score) is 1.00 with regard to its share of seats in the Federal Assembly.¹⁰ The FDP and the SP are overrepresented (1.53 and 1.28, respectively), whereas the CVP is underrepresented (0.88). The Gallagher Index of Disproportionality (or Least Squares Index, LSq) shows a degree of disproportionality (LSq=8.4) only slightly lower than the one calculated for political blocs (LSq=8.9).¹¹

¹⁰ R-score is calculated by dividing the proportion of a given group in the executive by its proportion in Parliament or in the population (see Ruedin 2013, 64). Notice also that in this and the following Figures, the final date of the various time spans is 31 December 2019. Of course, this presupposes that the composition of the Federal Council (as of 1 January 2016) will not change in the meantime. The assumption is plausible, I think, with regard to the parties. Possible vacancies might change the regional and linguistic composition of the executive, however.

¹¹ See Gallagher (1991). I follow Lijphart's (2012, 145, fn. 8) suggestion that the index should be adapted by excluding the small parties. For the purposes of this article, therefore, I have excluded from the index all parties that have never been represented in the executive. For the measurement of the bloc-centred proportionality, however, I have included all parliamentary groups represented in Parliament. Bochsler and Sciarini (2006) propose an even more sophisticated ("standardized") measure of disproportionality. It is useful for comparing disproportionality across cantonal governments as they vary in size (five or seven seats). For the present purposes, the Gallagher Index, as modified by Lijphart, shall suffice, since the size of the executive has remained stable since 1848.

Figure 3: Party disproportionality in the Federal Council (1920–2019, 1960–2019)



Source: Giudici and Stojanović (forthcoming).

Had Parliament opted for a bloc-centred definition of concordance (Figure 2) – for example, by assigning the second FDP seat to the CVP –, party disproportionality would have increased (LSq=10.2) but bloc disproportionality would have become significantly lower (LSq=5.5).

To situate the current degree of disproportionality in the Federal Council within a wider picture, I focus only on party representation since 1919, when the proportional representation (PR) for elections to the National Council was first used. Figure 3 shows that, in general, disproportionality has significantly decreased ever since (mean LSq=14.3). This tendency, expressed by fitted values in Figure 3, is mostly due to the introduction of the (old) Magic Formula in December 1959 (two FDP, two CVP, two SP, one SVP; effective as of 1 January 1960). If we concentrate only on the last six decades (1960–2019), disproportionality has *increased*, most notably since the late 1990s. With the election of Guy Parmelin, the Gallagher Index for the period 2016–2019 (LSq=8.4) is very close to the average value for the whole period of 1960–2019 (mean LSq=7.9).

But the logic of concordance concerns not only parties. It is also applied to the linguistic and regional composition of the government.¹² Since February 1999, this norm is

¹² See interview with Christian Levrat, SP president, and Christophe Darbellay, CVP president, “C’est un UDC latin ou rien”, *La Liberté*, 7 October 2015). Lehmruch (1993), Lijphart (2002) and Steiner (2002) also emphasize the importance of executive inclusiveness with regard to languages as an element of Swiss consociationalism. Other scholars, however, do not even mention the linguistic diversity in their essays on concordance (e.g., Batt 2005; Vatter 2008; Altermatt 2009).

anchored in the Constitution (Article 175.4), so that “[i]n electing the Federal Council, care must be taken to ensure that the various geographical and language regions of the country are appropriately represented”. This is a formal but *non-binding* recommendation. It replaced the “cantonal clause” (i.e., no more than one federal councillor per canton), a formal *and* binding clause that was effective from 1848 until 1999 (see Stojanović 2015). But even if insufficiently specific, constitutional articles do play a role in political life. As I show in the following Section, the elections of 9 December 2015 are a nice example of how the rhetoric of linguistic-regional concordance supports political strategies concerned with party-centred concordance.

3. A fair representation of languages and regions?

In early November 2015, when Toni Brunner, president of the SVP, announced¹³ his intention to propose a “ticket” with three candidates to fill the vacant seat of Ms. Widmer-Schlumpf, one person per language region, most commentators were taken by surprise. Up to that point, the names circulating in the media were almost exclusively from the German-speaking part of the country.

The background of the strategy lies in the wide consensus that the Federal Council should more or less reflect the linguistic and regional diversity of the country. This consensus is supported, on the one hand, by the empirical record of the Federal Council: since 1848, it has never been composed exclusively of German speakers, even though this group has always statistically dominated the Federal Assembly (Giudici and Stojanović forthcoming). On the other hand, the consensus is based on the (consociational) idea that a multicultural society can become a democracy only if its various cultural segments share executive power (Lijphart 1977; O’Leary 2005). As already mentioned, since 1999 this idea is also anchored in the Swiss Constitution (Article 175.4). So have the various regions and languages been “appropriately” represented in the Federal Council? This issue has rarely – and even then only briefly – been addressed in the literature¹⁴, or it has been misinterpreted¹⁵. In the following I first consider regions – i.e. the seven regions of Switzerland as defined by the Federal Statistical Office¹⁶ – and then languages.

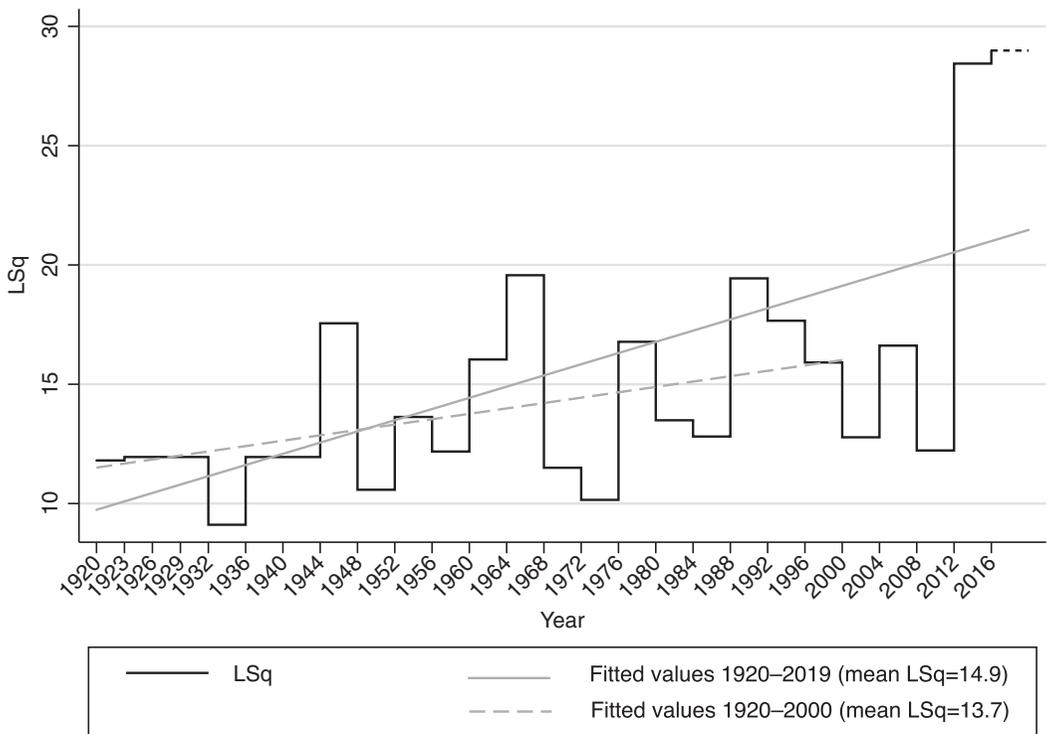
¹³ See interview with Toni Brunner, *SonntagsZeitung*, 8 November 2015.

¹⁴ For example, Neidhart (2002, 332), Kriesi and Trechsel (2008, 79) and Vatter (2014, 221) dedicate one to two sentences to this issue in which it is typically stated that Parliament makes sure that the various regions and languages are represented in the government. Linder (2010, 35) states that in 1999 the cantonal clause was abandoned in favour of “a new, informal gender rule”, without even mentioning the new regional-linguistic constitutional norm (see also Armingeon 1999, 467).

¹⁵ For example, Jane Mansbridge thinks that “in Switzerland and Belgium the governmental system has been explicitly designed to represent linguistic groups more or less proportionally” (2015, 265). And Benjamin Reilly believes that in Switzerland and Belgium the linguistic inclusiveness of the executive is “mandated by law” (2005, 164). They are right about Belgium, but the Swiss regime is neither explicit nor mandatory on this.

¹⁶ I use the seven statistical regions for three reasons. First, most of them overlap with the regions that were explicitly mentioned in the parliamentary debates of 1998 that led to the formulation of Article 175.4. Second, since 1999 politicians and parties have often interpreted this constitutional article by referring to one or the other statistical region (Stojanović 2013, 272). Third, recent parliamentary initiatives clearly refer to a fair representation of “seven regions” (see parliamentary initiative Wermuth, nr. 12.489).

Figure 4: Regional disproportionality in the Federal Council (1920–2019; 1920–2000)



Source: Giudici and Stojanović (forthcoming).

Figure 4 shows regional disproportionality since 1920. Until 2000, disproportionality has increased slightly (mean $LSq=13.7$).¹⁷ However, over the whole time span, the average disproportionality was higher (mean $LSq=14.9$). The strongest single increase is registered in 2010 when, for the first time in the history of the executive, four federal councillors came from the cantons of the *Espace Mittelland*.

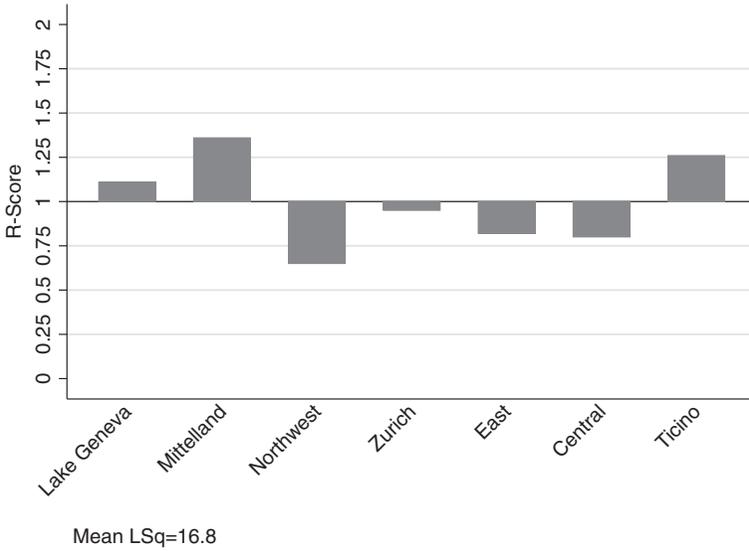
Which regions have been under- or overrepresented (with regard to their seat share in Parliament)? The answer will of course depend on the time span considered. As the main focus of this article is on the composition of the Federal Council since the introduction of the (old) Magic Formula, Figure 5 shows regional representation since 1960. *Espace Mittelland* (R-score=1.36) is the most overrepresented region, followed by Ticino (1.26) and *Arc lémanique* (or Lake Geneva; 1.11). North-western Switzerland is the most underrepresented (0.65), followed by Central (0.80) and Eastern Switzerland (0.82) as well as Zurich (0.95).

The question of an “appropriate” representation is even more complicated for linguistic groups, considering the very dissimilar population sizes of the various languages, their small number and only seven¹⁸ seats in the Federal Council. Moreover, should we

¹⁷ Notice that given the unequal size of the seven regions and the limited number of seats in the Federal Council, a perfect proportionality ($LSq=0$) is difficult to achieve. The lowest disproportionality was registered in 1908–1911 ($LSq=5.2$; Giudici and Stojanović forthcoming).

¹⁸ In recent years a large minority of Parliament endorsed proposals – most notably two cantonal initiatives from Ticino (nr. 10.321 and 12.307) – to increase the number of seats to nine, precisely with the intention to improve the linguistic and regional inclusiveness of the executive (Stojanović 2015, 65, fn. 14).

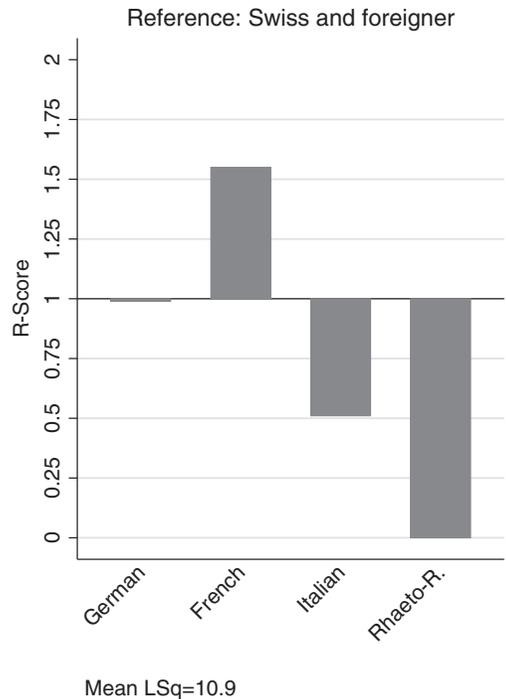
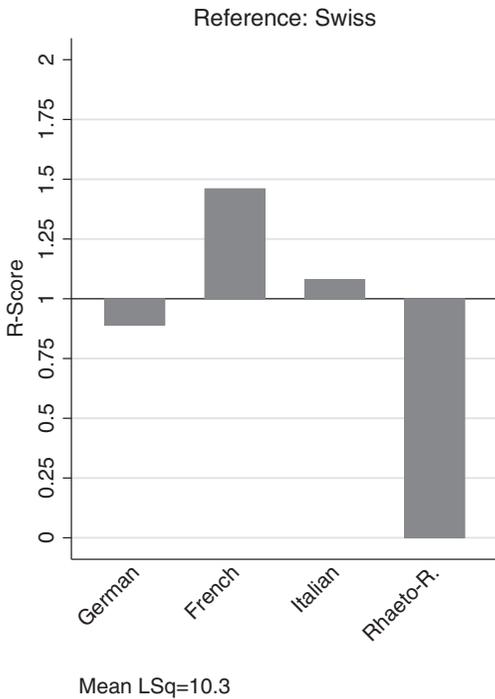
Figure 5: Representation of regions in the Federal Council (1960–2019)



Note: In relation to percentages in the Federal Assembly.

Figure 6: Representation by language in the Federal Council (1960–2019)

R-Scores 1960–2019



Note: In relation to percentages in the population (Swiss; Swiss and foreigner).

compare the representation of language groups with their overall share of the population (including foreign residents) or only among those holding Swiss citizenship?¹⁹ Both approaches can be justified, so the results of both are displayed in Figure 6 for 1960–2019. Figure 6 shows that the average disproportionality (measured by LSq) according to the two approaches is quite similar. The Italian speakers, however, are slightly overrepresented in the former case (R-score=1.08) and clearly underrepresented in the latter (0.51). (I particularly stress this finding because the question of Italian speakers' executive representation has been a matter of debate in many governmental elections since 1999, when the last Italian speaker left office; see Altermatt 2015b; Stojanović 2015).

It is important to note that party-centred concordance is open for interpretation and one can consider various statistical references and formulas for translating parliamentary seats into governmental seats (see Bochsler and Sciarini 2006). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Magic Formula did not change for over fifty years (from 1960 to 2003), while the linguistic and regional composition of the executive has been much less stable.

This leads me to argue that what really matters for political parties is the division of power *amongst themselves*. Linguistic and/or regional concordance are put forward for rhetorical and tactical purposes but count much less and play only a subordinate role. The election of Mr. Parmelin is a nice illustration of this point. Contrary to the expectations expressed by journalists and political scientists, for a large majority of MPs electing a third French speaker was not a problem. Centrist and left-wing MPs voted for him because he was considered more moderate than either Mr. Aeschi, a German speaker from Zug, or Mr. Gobbi, an Italian speaker from Ticino. A similar outcome occurred in December 1959, when three French and four German speakers, but no Italian or Romansh speaker, were elected. So clearly, in both 1959 and 2015, representation of *parties* was the main issue at stake.

Of course, while political, partisan and even personal calculations trump regional and linguistic considerations, this does not mean that the latter are unimportant. There are borderlines that have never been crossed in the past and will hardly be crossed in the future. For example, it is highly improbable that Parliament would elect a Federal Council composed only of German speakers or a majority of French speakers.

Further, even though the regional and linguistic (but also gender) identities of candidates are far less important than party-centred considerations, such identities are often used by parties and politicians as instruments to promote or hinder certain candidates. In doing so, they usually cite Article 175.4 of the Constitution. The 2015 governmental elections were no exception. After Ms. Widmer-Schlumpf announced her resignation, the media underlined the importance of the regional and linguistic factors. For the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, candidates from Eastern Switzerland were first in line, because the Constitution ought to be respected.²⁰ The linguistic argument was used to dismiss potential French-speaking candidates, arguing that from an “arithmetic” point of view the French speakers could claim only 1.75 seats in the government.²¹

¹⁹ If we consider only Swiss citizens, a further difficulty arises: should we base our calculations on census data (available only until 2000) or the seats that various language groups have in Parliament? I have opted for the former approach because we lack data on the linguistic identity of Swiss MPs before 1979. (For the period from 1979 until 2007, see Stojanović 2006, 136 and 138.)

²⁰ “Vernunftentscheid einer Kämpferin”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 October 2015. See also “Bundesrat ohne Ostschweiz”, *St. Galler Tagblatt*, 25 November 2015.

²¹ “SVP-Papabili in den Startlöchern”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 October 2015.

In sum, in 2015 the linguistic and regional concordance was a strategic tool used by the SVP in order to regain a second seat with one of its *official*²² candidates and to re-establish party-centred proportionality in the Federal Council. Internally, the strategy was probably aimed at outmanoeuvring certain candidates from German-speaking Switzerland in favour of Mr. Aeschi.²³ Externally, the SVP could present itself as a truly national, multilingual party.

That said, we can only speculate about the true reasons behind this strategy. It might have been that the preferred option for some SVP hardliners was the election of Mr. Aeschi. But the other two options had their appeal, too. For example, the election of Mr. Parmelin could help to strengthen the party in the French-speaking cantons. Indeed, one SVP politician said that the true strategy of the SVP leadership was the election of a French speaker and that from the very beginning they knew that Mr. Aeschi was “ineligible”.²⁴

We should also remember that political strategies are influenced not only by party interests but also by personal ambition. In particular, let me notice that sooner rather than later the acting SVP federal councillor, Ueli Maurer, is expected to retire. If some politicians from the SVP leadership have the ambition to become federal councillors, they might have concluded that December 2015 was not “their” moment and that it was wiser to wait until Mr. Maurer retires. As most *papabili* from the current SVP leadership are German speakers, seen from *that* perspective the election of a non-German speaker in December 2015 was clearly in their interest.²⁵

Be that as it may, the strategy of the SVP leadership was successful also because it was facilitated by the peculiar electoral system used for governmental elections. In the following Section, I show how its mechanisms have favoured the emergence and stability of the Magic Formula.

4. The impact of the governmental electoral system on the Magic Formula

According to Klöti (2006, 155-6), the emergence of the Swiss system of concordance, in particular with regard to the composition of the Federal Council, can be explained mainly by three institutional constraints: direct democracy, federalism and the PR system for elections to the National Council. For Vatter (2014, 78, my translation), PR was “an important institutional precondition” for the adoption of the Magic Formula in 1959.

²² In the SVP’s statutes there is a clause according to which any member of the SVP elected to the Federal Council without being the official candidate will be expelled from the party. On 9 December 2015 this clause – the possible anti-constitutionality of which raised an interesting debate among legal scholars (see Leuzinger 2015) – was fiercely criticized by other parties. The speakers of the Christian Democrats and Radicals openly stated that they might not support the official SVP candidates again if this clause were still in place by the next election.

²³ This manoeuvre was identified as such, and clearly resented, by other candidates, especially those from Eastern Switzerland. See, e.g., “Heinz Brand kritisiert Bundesratsticket”, *SRF*, 3 December 2015; “Von SVP ausgelassener Hannes Germann vermutet ‘abgekartete Sache’”, *SDA*, 4 December 2015.

²⁴ Interview with Pierre Rusconi, a SVP national councillor (2011–2015) from Ticino (“Vi devo dire la verità?”, *Libera TV*, 12 December 2015, available from bit.ly/rusconi).

²⁵ Apart from Mr. Bunner, I think of Adrian Amstutz (the speaker of the SVP parliamentary group) and Albert Rösti, the designated successor of Mr. Bunner. (Notice, also, that they are both from the canton of Berne which, since 2010, already has had two representatives in the government.)

Given this emphasis on the *institutional* factors that favoured the emergence of the Magic Formula, and especially on PR, it is astounding that one major institution has rarely been addressed in the literature: the electoral system for *governmental* elections.²⁶

The basic principles for governmental elections are stipulated in the Constitution (Articles 143, 157.1.a, 168.1, 175), while the specific rules are fixed in the Parliament Act of 2002 (Articles 130 and 132). For reasons of space, I cannot undertake a full analysis of all features of these rules, but propose to draw attention to two particularly important aspects.

First, the fact that seats are filled *individually and sequentially* provides an incentive for each governmental party to support other parties in order to secure its own seats (Armingeon 1999, 469). As the governmental elections of 9 December 2015 show, it is in their interest to declare their support for all incumbent candidates at the very least, as no party alone has the majority in Parliament. It is certainly no coincidence that between 1919 and 2003 *every* incumbent federal councillor was re-elected in the *first* round (Lüthi 2014, 895). Notice also that elections are held by secret ballot and that Parliament cannot recall an elected member of the Federal Council until the next general election.

Second, starting with the third round, the least successful candidate is excluded from all subsequent rounds. Coupled with the rule that blank and invalid ballots are not counted for determining the majority, this implies that MPs cannot but vote for a given set of candidates in the final, decisive rounds. Otherwise (for example, if they cast blank ballots) they would reduce the threshold for the majority and therefore might end up favouring the election of their *least-preferred* candidate.²⁷ We can assume, therefore, that in normal circumstances a rational political actor would cast valid ballots until the end of the voting procedure. This is what Sartori (1986, 54) calls the “constraining-restraining effect” of the electoral system with regard to the voter’s choice.

4.1. *Alternative Vote*

The electoral system used in elections to the Federal Council is evidently *sui generis*. Nevertheless, we shall see if it resembles any existing system. In my view, the most similar system is the Alternative Vote (AV; see Reilly 2001, 33–6; 2002; Farrell and McAllister 2005; Lijphart 2012, 134). AV is a majoritarian and preferential system where voters rank the candidates in order of preference. It is used in single-member districts and requires the winning candidate to gain the (absolute) majority of first preferences. If nobody reaches that goal, the candidate with the lowest number of first preferences is excluded from the election and the respective votes are redistributed to other candidates according to the second preference indicated by his or her voters, and so on. The process of “sequential elimination” (Reilly 2002, 158) ends when one candidate has received at least half of the votes.

This resembles the procedure in the elections to the Federal Council, especially from the third round onwards. Formally, the Swiss executive is a seven-member body but, as said,

²⁶ Kriesi and Trechsel (2008, 80; see also Kriesi 1995, 212) remark that majoritarian rules and the individual election of federal councillors imply that (a) “parties must find compromises in multilateral negotiations among parliamentary factions” and that (b) “moderate candidates tend to be more acceptable to Parliament than more polarizing ones”. Armingeon (1999, 469) also briefly explores the electoral procedure as one among many factors that influence the stability of coalition governments in Switzerland.

²⁷ To be sure, a single ballot will not always and by itself reduce the threshold for the absolute majority. It will decrease it by one only if the total number of valid ballots is even. I thank Claudio Kuster for this remark.

Table 1: The election of Joseph Deiss to the Federal Council, 11 March 1999

Round	Eugen David (Centre-left)	Jean-F. Roth (Centre-left)	Remigio Ratti* (Centre)	Joseph Deiss* (Centre)	Adalbert Durrer* (Centre-right)	Peter Hess (Centre-right)	Bruno Frick (Right)	Other	Ballots (all/blank/invalid/valid)	Majority
1 st	14	60	33	20	34	54	16	14	244/0/0/244	123
2 nd	(≤8)	73	17	34	35	66	11	8	244/0/0/244	123
3 rd	excluded	81	(≤9)	37	32	82	(≤9)	12	245/0/1/244	123
4 th	–	78	excluded	51	18	98	excluded	excluded	245/0/0/244	123
5 th	–	23	–	104	excluded	117	–	–	244/0/0/244	123
6 th	–	excluded	–	120	–	119	–	–	244/5/0/239	120

Source: *Bulletin officiel*, 11 March 1999.

Note: All candidates are from the CVP (*=official). Excluded from the election are (a) candidates who obtain fewer than ten votes from the second ballot onwards and (b) the candidate who receives the lowest number of votes from the third round onwards, unless more than one candidate receives this same number of votes (Art. 132.4, Parliament Act). The category “Other” contains candidates who in any given round received less than 10 votes; their names are not communicated by the speaker of Parliament. As the election proceeded, thus, the least successful candidates who had received 10 or more votes in the first round ended up in the category “Other” and were declared ineligible starting from the third round onwards. We can deduce the maximum number of votes they received (see numbers in brackets) by looking at the total votes received by “Other”. For example, we know that from the third round onwards, Mr. David was not among the eligible candidates, so in the second round he must have received eight votes or less. From the third round onwards, no new candidates were allowed, so the 12 votes received by “Other” in the third round went to Mr. Ratti and/or Mr. Frick. But as they were declared ineligible in the fourth round, we know that none of them received more than nine votes in the third round.

The position of the candidates on the left-right axes has been determined by looking at their ranking in the National Council in 1998, if applicable, ranging from -10.0 (farthest left) to 10.0 (farthest right): Ratti -0.4, Deiss 0.6, Durrer 1.5, Hess 1.5 (the ranking is available online; Hermann 2015). For candidates who were not members of the National Council, I have consulted news reports. Mr. Frick was considered the most right-wing of all candidates (see “Der Aussenseiter mit der falschen Etikette”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 2 February 1999). Mr. Hess was considered more right-wing than Mr. Durrer and was the preferred candidate of the FDP, while Mr. Roth was considered “rather left” and was preferred by the SP (see “Neues Traumdual Roos/Roth”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 6 March 1999). According to the NZZ, however, the first choice of the left was Mr. David (see “Chorographie einer Bundesratswahl”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 March 1999). For more details on the background conditions and the left-right aisles in the CVP, see Ladner (1999).

Table 2: The election of Guy Parmelin to the Federal Council, 9 December 2015

<i>Round</i>	Viola Amherd (Centre)	Thomas Hurter (Right)	Guy Parmelin* (Right)	Thomas Aeschi* (Very right)	Norman Gobbi* (Very right)	Other	Ballots (all/blank/ invalid/ valid)	Ma- jority
<i>1st</i>	16	22	90	61	50	4	245/2/0/243	122
<i>2nd</i>	(≤9)	(≤9)	117	78	30	14	244/5/0/239	120
<i>3rd</i>	excluded	excluded	138	88	11	excluded	243/6/0/237	119

Source: Bulletin officiel, 9 Dec. 2015.

Note: All candidates are from the SVP (*=official), apart from Viola Amherd (CVP). For numbers in brackets, see Note to Table 1. The position of the candidates on the left-right axes has been determined by looking at their ranking in the National Council in 2015: Amherd 0.0, Hurter 6.9, Parmelin 7.2, Aeschi 8.9. As for Mr. Gobbi (who was a national councillor only briefly, from March 2010 to April 2011), the fact that he was the only candidate declared “ineligible” by the Social Democrats justifies his being placed to the right of Mr. Aeschi.

its members are elected individually and sequentially, which resembles elections in single-member districts.

To illustrate this point, consider the election of Joseph Deiss on 11 March 1999, described by Altermatt (2015b) as an “electoral thriller” (*Wahlkrimi*). Mr. Deiss was elected in the sixth round with 50.2% of the votes (120 out of 239), even though he was the preferred choice of only 8.2% of MPs (20 out of 244) in the first round of the election (Table 1). Here, the *centripetal* effect of the electoral system (Cox 1997, 231–2) is manifest in the fact that, in the end, a centrist candidate was elected.

The election of Mr. Parmelin (Table 2) was more rapid but also shows the centripetal effect of the system. The main difference with regard to the election of Mr. Deiss is that already in the first round Mr. Parmelin received the plurality of first preferences.

If we concentrate on the fact that the non-official candidates received only 42 first preferences and that the members of the Green parliamentary group (n=13) did not support any SVP candidate (at least in the first round), we can advance some interesting considerations with regard to the functioning of concordance. Particularly stimulating is a focus on the Social Democrats the principal ideological adversaries of the SVP. Manifestly, a majority of them opted for Mr. Parmelin already in the first round. He was seen as more moderate and thus more acceptable than Mr. Aeschi (considered far too close to Mr. Blocher, the SVP’s key figure and a hardliner) and Mr. Gobbi (declared “ineligible” by the SP on the eve of the election). In other words, from the very beginning, the Social Democrats (a) voted in favour of the SVP’s *second* governmental seat and (b) most of them supported one of the SVP’s *official* candidates.

Probably an important explanation is that the SP could not reach a pre-electoral agreement with the centrist parties on a candidate of the centre bloc or on an independent-minded non-official SVP candidate (like Ms. Widmer-Schlumpf in 2007). But the fact that in the end even the Social Democrats voted *en masse* for an official SVP candidate can only be explained by the features of the electoral system itself. Had they abstained from the vote, they would have significantly reduced the majority threshold so that their least preferred candidate might have been elected. (Considering the sum of the votes received by Mr. Aeschi and Mr. Gobbi, this was a real possibility.)

4.2. *A centripetal (not consociational) tool that favours concordance*

The argument sketched in §4.1 should lead us to further explore the apparent paradox that an overtly majoritarian electoral system is supportive of proportional power-sharing executives. The paradox is only apparent, though, because this outcome is actually fully in line with the so-called *centripetalist approach* to power sharing (Horowitz 1985; 1991; Reilly 2001; 2002).²⁸

According to this approach, majoritarian systems such as AV may have two important effects: (a) they favour the electoral success of moderate candidates and (b) they promote the formation of *pre*-electoral coalitions, encouraging coordination and accommodation across rival parties and groups. The two tables presented in §4.1 nicely illustrate the first point. In this sub-section I shall say more on the second point.

Generally speaking, the electoral system has been recognized “as probably the most powerful instrument for shaping the political system” (Lijphart 1991, 91). In particular, it influences the strategic coordination of political parties (Cox 1997) and “has a major effect on coalition bargaining” (Strøm, Budge and Laver 1994, 316). As for AV, there is evidence that it promotes intense *pre*-electoral strategic coordination between parties. Farrell and McAllister (2005, 89), for example, have remarked that under AV “[e]very election is preceded by an intense period of bargaining between the parties as to how they will advise their supporters to rank the competing candidates”. Reilly (2001, 53) also maintains that it is “one of the few electoral systems which sets up a coalition formation phase *before* elections rather than after them” and that it thus “encourages the intertwining of coalition formation with the politics of electoral competition”. We find support, therefore, for the thesis that the AV-like electoral system used for Swiss executive elections might have played out in favour of the system of concordance, that is, the Magic Formula.

Further support for this thesis is provided by Swiss decision makers themselves. In a 2001 report, the Political Institutions Committee of the first chamber of Parliament analysed proposals for a reform of the electoral procedure (Staatspolitische Kommission 2001). (A few years before, a considerable number of MPs had supported a proposal to elect federal councillors collectively, simultaneously and via an open-list single ballot.²⁹) Even though the report itself prudently stated that it is difficult to predict the effects of a reform and that the Magic Formula is influenced not only by electoral procedures but also by other institutions, such as direct democracy (p. 3515), it also stressed that for opponents of the proposal the current system “*guarantees a certain stability* with regard to the composition of the executive” (p. 3561, my emphasis and translation). Later, similar proposals (demanding, however, a closed- instead of an open-list system) were explicitly rejected because they would lead to a “system change *in the direction of a competitive system*” (Lüthi 2014, 894, fn. 4, my emphasis and translation).³⁰

²⁸ Notice also that in the Swiss context the paradox has already been explored in the literature on “voluntary proportionality” in *cantonal* executive elections (see, e.g., Lutz 2013).

²⁹ The simultaneous election of federal councillors was explicitly permitted in the 1859 rules of electoral procedure (*Wahlreglement*, Articles 4 and 13; Lüthi 2014, 893). But Parliament never used that option, so that the individual and sequential election of federal councillors became an informal rule (it was codified only in 1979). I thank Claudio Kuster for drawing my attention to this point.

³⁰ An even deeper reform (rejected by Swiss voters in 1900, 1942 and 2013) would consist in having the executive elected directly by citizens. Its probable outcome would be a return to the *old* Magic Formula (Milic, Vatter and Bucher 2012). In other words, the result would be a *less* proportional executive, as the strongest party (the SVP) would receive only one seat.

By saying this I do not claim that the electoral system actually *produced* the Magic Formula. To quote Duverger (1986, 71), the relationship between electoral rules and the political system “is not mechanic and automatic”. Similarly, Sartori (1986, 59) argues that an electoral system cannot by itself produce a given political system “but it will help *maintain* an already existing one”; once established, it “exerts a brakelike influence and obtains a freezing effect”.

The Magic Formula was a result of “historical accidents and strategic planning” (Altermatt 2015a, my translation). In particular, and contrary to common wisdom, it was not the outcome of *consensus* but of political *struggle* between Christian Democrats and Radicals (Seidl 2003; Altermatt 2015a). So it would be wrong to claim that the AV-like electoral system by itself forged elite consensus and produced the system of concordance. But once in place, the electoral system, together with other factors,³¹ has helped to stabilize the system of concordance, thanks also to the effects of iteration and political learning (see Reilly 2001, 172–4), as well as of inertia and familiarity with coalition partners that typically tend to reduce transaction costs of bargaining (Warwick 1996).

6. Conclusion

In this article I have, first of all, shown that with the election of Guy Parmelin in December 2015, the system of (arithmetic) concordance in the Swiss federal executive with regard to the party-centred proportionality has been re-established. Measured by the Gallagher Index, it is now almost identical to the average value for the period after 1960. Second, linguistic and regional diversity also played a role in the 2015 governmental elections. However, that role was clearly instrumental to the re-establishment of the (new) Magic Formula and was, thus, subordinate to partisan and political considerations. The result is that the executive is now much less balanced with regard to regions and languages than it used to be.

Finally, I have emphasised the fact that the governmental electoral system strongly resembles a majoritarian preferential system known as Alternative Vote, favoured by the centripetalist school of thought (Horowitz 1985; Reilly 2001). I have also advanced the thesis that this AV-like electoral system has produced effects anticipated by centripetalist scholars (moderation, strategic cooperation, pre-electoral coalitions) and, thus, has helped to stabilize the system of concordance over time. Note that Lijphart (1994, 224; cited in Reilly 2001, 168; see also Lijphart 1991) has criticized centripetal prescriptions featuring majoritarian electoral rules like AV as “deeply flawed and dangerous” for multi-ethnic states – at the same time, however, he has cherished the Swiss Magic Formula as a prime example of “grand coalition” (e.g., Lijphart 1977, ch. 2). If my thesis is correct, then, it appears less straightforward that the concordance with regard to the composition of the Swiss government can be read through consociational lenses only (see also Barry 1975, 481–90). If so many Swiss institutions are based on majoritarian rules (direct democracy, elections to the upper chamber, nearly all cantonal executive elections and, finally, federal executive elections), and if they do not undermine but actually sustain the system of

³¹ These factors can be, according to Armingeon (1999), both non-institutional (socio-economic prosperity, political culture based on concordance, voters’ positive attitudes towards four-party coalitions) and institutional (direct democracy, federalism, the principle of collegiality, non-professional politicians [*Milizsystem*] and expert commissions, the presidential features of the Federal Council and, finally, the electoral procedures themselves).

concordance, then we should reassess the value of the Swiss example in consociational theory.

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