Alpine Troubles: Trajectories of De-Consociationalisation in Austria and Switzerland Compared

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Abstract: For all their differences, both Austria and Switzerland have long been considered to represent key examples of consociational democracy. Since the 1990s, both countries have however faced major challenges to their respective consociationalist regimes. One of the shared features of regime evolution and change in Austria and Switzerland, which can be meaningfully referred to as ‘de-consociationalisation’, concerns the successful exploitation of external shocks by powerful populist parties. Taking stock of the developments in four different areas (the electoral, the parliamentary and the executive arena as well as interest group/state relations), we identify a complex dynamic which has made the two countries more similar in some respects, but more different in others. Overall, two decades into the twenty-first century, Austria is significantly less of a consociationalist regime than Switzerland.

KEYWORDS: Austria, Switzerland, Consociational democracy, De-consociationalisation

Introduction

Half a century after its scholarly ‘discovery’, consociationalism has retained its status as a key concept in comparative politics. While over the past decades several eminent scholars have contributed to the evolving conceptualization of consociational democracy (see M. Andeweg 2000), the core of the concept is owed to Arend Lijphart. Lijphart famously distinguished four basic components of consociational democracy: proportional representation (at the level of electoral systems and concerning the distribution of resources), political power-sharing within the executive branch (with oversized ‘grand coalitions’ as the prototype), cultural autonomy for segmented minorities (to be institutionalized by federal or semi-federal structures), and a guaranteed minority veto against decisions made by a governing majority (Lijphart 1977). Most scholars associate with consociational democracy also, and in particular, distinctly cooperative relations between political elites who, despite their deep-seated conflicts, interact with each other in an ‘amicable way’ across the different arenas of a political system.

One of the merits of the concept, whose components were originally derived inductively, is its potential for capturing not just established patterns but also developments in...
complex regimes, which may either lead a polity towards or away from consociational democracy. The dynamics of what we refer to here as ‘de-consociationalisation’ – a weakening of the defining features of consociationalist governance – have recently been explored by Adrian Vatter in a case study on political change in Switzerland (Vatter 2016). Referring to Lijphart’s characterisation of consociational democracy, Vatter conceptualized a possible departure from consociational democracy as a move towards centrifugal democracy. The latter is marked by ‘a highly fragmented party system (...); a highly polarized party system with large ideological divides between the major parties on the left and right; (...) a segmented society; and (...) expressly competitive-conflictual elite behaviour between political camps, thereby hindering compromise’ (Vatter 2016: 62). Based on a somewhat more fine-grained framework, which distinguishes between eight characteristics,3 Vatter eventually arrives at the conclusion that Swiss democracy in the period of 1992-2015 has experienced significant change and displayed features of ‘centrifugal democracy’ with regard to three aspects studied: the party system (which has become both more fragmented and polarized), elite behaviour in parliament, and elite behaviour on popular votes which have both become more conflictual (Vatter 2016: 71).

Valuable as Vatter’s contribution is, we seek to provide a slightly different, yet complementary, perspective on recent developments in the Alpine region. Apart from structural differences between Austrian and Swiss democracy that would appear to preclude a direct comparison of all aspects distinguished by Vatter, we believe that the study of complex political and social phenomena has much to benefit from a reasonable variety of concepts and approaches adopted. Before introducing our approach in more detail, a preliminary note on the cases to be compared is warranted.

In international political research, Austria and Switzerland have long been considered to be core members of the family of consociational democracies, even ‘exemplary cases’ of this particular form of democratic government. This holds true for the central status of consensus-seeking in both countries, however, more than for other aspects that have featured prominently in conceptual debates about the defining features of consociational democracy, such as the centrality of party leaders, and leadership more generally (see Lehmbuch 2003: 65; Lijphart 1968: 211). While, in this regard, Austria is considered a classic case of consociational democracy in Arend Lijphart’s sense, alongside such countries as Belgium or the Netherlands, Switzerland has, virtually since the inception of the Swiss federation, been marked by mistrust toward powerful individual leadership and a culture of ‘non-leadership’ (Baylis 1989; Koch 2014).4 Austria and Switzerland have also been considered different with regard to another defining element of consociationalism: Switzerland has never been home to social pillars, highlighted by Lijphart (1968) as the means that keep politically hostile political groups or camps in a divided society apart. Consequently many scholars have argued that, strictly speaking, Switzerland does not fit the concept of consociationalism very well (Church 2016: 173–174; Luther 1999; Sciarini and Hug 1999). Still, in comparative political research both countries continue to be considered a particular consensus-centred type of democracy and are studied within the

3 Namely, multiparty government (grand coalition), cultural autonomy (federalism), PR system and proportionally elected public offices, minority veto (council of States, double majority), fragmentation and polarization of the party system, segmentation into sub-communities (not applicable), elite behaviour in parliament, elite behaviour on popular votes.

4 Rather than being considered a structural weakness, this rare ‘leader-proof’ type of democracy has not failed to impress some established scholars of Westminster democracy (see, for example, King 2016).
boundaries of a most-similar cases design (see, for example, Magone 2017), and the
majority of experts on Swiss politics as well have tended to refer to Switzerland as a
(special) case of a consociational democracy.5

Swiss-style and Austrian-style consociationalism essentially came about as particular sets
of unwritten rules of democratic governance, rather than due to conscious institutional
design. Because of that, they remained vulnerable to challenges. Over the last few decades
both countries have received much attention by observers specifically for experiencing
major political events that appeared to challenge the established consociationalist regime.
In a sweeping assessment, Richard Rose (2000) declared ‘the end of consensus’ in the two
Alpine republics. The immediate cause for this assessment apparently was the Austrian
parliamentary election of 1999, which made the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) the second
strongest party at the national level, before eventually joining a government led by the
Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP). The electoral success of a right-wing populist party in
Austria was to some extent echoed by the results of the Swiss national elections of the
same year, which also brought significant gains for the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) as the
closest counterpart of the FPÖ in the Swiss party system. These two parties ‘became the
only far-right parties in post-war Western Europe to outpoll their mainstream conservative
competitors’ (McGann and Kitschelt 2005: 147). Strictly speaking, though, the elections of
1999 signalled neither the end of consensus (which persisted in both countries in many
ways) nor the beginning of the departure from consociational democracy (which had set in
earlier, at least in Austria).6

The shared developments at the level of party and electoral politics of the 1990s, and
beyond, reflected similar challenges at the societal level: The challenge to the
consociational system was in both countries driven by political parties (the FPÖ in
Austria, and the SVP in Switzerland) that achieved electoral success by politicising the
same external shocks, namely European integration (and how to react to it) and
immigration from outside of Western Europe.

The EEC’s common market project forced the political elites and electorates of these
two small, export-oriented economies, which until then had remained outside as members
of the rival European Free Trade Area, to debate and decide on the respective country’s
future course. The EU accession treaty (Austria) as well as the bilateral agreements
(Switzerland) forced the respective country to quickly implement large policy changes and
institutional adaptations. At the same time, a series of civil wars in the 1990s both in the
vicinity of these countries, as in the former state of Yugoslavia, and more distant ones,
such as in Turkey, Sri Lanka (with Tamils arriving in large numbers already in the 1980s),
Afghanistan, Iraq and most recently Syria, created tens of thousands of war refugees and
displaced persons fleeing to safety in Austria or Switzerland. Further, in the following
decade, migration for economic and educational reasons from Western European and the

5 It seems useful to note that we do not claim that our comparison of Austria and Switzerland implements a most
similar or a most different case design. The set of differences and similarities just outlined clearly suggests that
neither of these two research designs fits well. This should not be seen as a problem, though. The aim of the
article is not to establish or defend a particular causal statement, but to provide a comparative account of recent
developments with indicators that scholars of consociationalism have employed before. As Gerring (2012) reminds
us, notwithstanding the current embracing of causality-driven research in the discipline, substantive description as
such has its rightful place in empirical political science.

6 Indeed, as early as 1992, Müller and Luther (1992) inquired if Austria was still a case of consociational
democracy – an in-depth inquiry to be echoed full-scale in political research on Switzerland only about a quarter
century later (Bochsler et al. 2015; Sciarini et al. 2015; Vatter 2016).
new Eastern European EU member states increased to new heights, followed by a politicisation of Islam-related issues by political parties in the second half of the 2000s (Dolezal et al. 2010). The immigration issue spectacularly rose to the top of the public agenda again in 2015 when a huge trek of refugees started from Greece on a northbound journey, most of them crossing Austria, with almost a hundred thousand applying for asylum there (see Figure A1 in the online appendix).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: First, we set out the conceptual framework and the indicators that will be used for assessing the changes in Swiss and Austrian consociationalism over the past decades (section 2). Drawing on these indicators, we then empirically analyse the two cases, showing the extent and trajectories of de-consociationalism (section 3). The closing section eventually offers a summary and comparative evaluation of the key developments in both countries.

Conceptual Framework and Indicators

Austria and Switzerland faced similar external shocks and challenges from the late 1980s onwards, which were politicised in such a way as to challenge the consociational system. A changing environment alone cannot account for the ‘de-consociationalisation’ observed in both countries. Exogenous challenges and changes have to be politically ‘processed’ in order to become part of the domestic political agenda. Political reality is a set of particular perceptions of reality, and, ultimately, political issues are what political actors make of them. More specifically, we contend that the external challenges facing Austria and Switzerland, while being important in themselves, were fully brought to bear only through the strategic use of these issues by parties, in particular the SVP and the FPÖ. Indeed, these two parties have been both beneficiaries and active driving forces of ‘de-consociationalisation’.

Thus, in what follows, we stick to an actor-centred conceptualization of domestic political change (see, for example, Cortell and Peterson 1999). For our empirical stocktaking in section 3, we distinguish between different arenas of the political system: the electoral arena, the executive arena, the parliamentary arena, and the arena of relations between the state and interest group relations. The notion of ‘arena’, as a place where different actors interact, clearly implies an actor-centred understanding of political continuity and change in democratic regimes.

These arenas have been of different importance in Swiss and Austrian mainstream notions of consociational democracy. While the most striking feature of Swiss-style consociationalism relates to the executive, with a government that has been controlled by the same parties for decades, Austrian notions of consociational democracy have always focused on both the executive arena (with ‘grand coalitions’ as the factual embodiment of consociationalism Austrian-style) and the arena of relations between the state and interest groups. It could even be argued that when the formation of single party governments in the late 1960s and 1970s seemed to signal an end to consociational governance in Austria, neo-corporatist interest mediation became the most obvious hallmark, and anchor, of Austrian consociational democracy.

Set into this wider conceptual context, we suggest a set of indicators of ‘de-consociationalisation’ – understood as a departure from the status quo ante of consociational governance in Switzerland and Austria three to four decades ago – that will guide our comparative empirical assessments. In the electoral arena, we shall look into (a) the degree of fragmentation and volatility of the vote as well as the polarization of the party system and (b) the programmatic transformation of key actors with a focus on SVP and FPÖ. While there are no clear-cut indicators of a possible departure from consociationalist governance, in
combination with the overall style of key actors in that area, these indicators provide a useful measure of possible ‘de-consociationalisation’.

In the executive arena, we look (a) into changes in the party complexion of the government and the government format. Most importantly, ‘oversized coalitions’ (either ‘surplus coalitions’, involving more parties than are needed to bring about a parliamentary majority, or governments involving all pillar parties) mark a defining feature of consociational democracy. Accordingly, any departure from these coalition formats signals a dynamic towards ‘de-consociationalisation’. In the highly specific Swiss case, even the government-formation process itself can be considered an important indicator of possible changes away from established consociational practice. Thus, we also revisit (b) the evolution of ‘government elections’ in the Swiss parliament.

As to the parliamentary arena, our overall focus is on the possible increase in parliamentary activity and conflict – both of which would signal a departure from consensus-oriented and pre-parliamentary-centred consociational governance. Our main indicator is the voting coherence of the major parties in the parliamentary arena, i.e., the overall parliamentary consensus in parliamentary voting. This includes the identification and evaluation of the politically ‘relevant’ parliamentary parties. While negotiations across government and opposition parties may indicate an element of consociationalist parliamentary governance, governments being held hostage by ‘fundamental oppositions’ challenging the very regime, would rather indicate an opposite dynamic.

Finally, regarding the arena of state and interest group relations, we first look for (a) signs of a possible weakening of those interest groups that were central to the once established regime of neo-corporatism in either country (i.e., business associations in Switzerland, and trade unions in Austria) in terms of their organizational strength and power status in key decision-making bodies. Further, we assess (b) the development of the ‘policy scope’ of the social partners.

While we confine our analysis below to this set of indicators for reasons of comparability, we do not fail to acknowledge that the Swiss version of consociational democracy is inconceivable without its direct democratic components, and that there is a particular nexus between Swiss-style consociationalism and direct democracy. In fact, the early inception of direct democracy in Switzerland has historically shaped other core features of Swiss politics, including in particular the party composition of Swiss federal governments. As Neidhart (1970) has shown nearly half a century ago, the consecutive increase in the number of governing parties, and the eventual formation of effective all-party governments, came about as the older government parties sought to collude erstwhile opposition parties into government in order to contain the latter’s destructive potential in the direct democratic arena. While there is no real equivalent to the unique institutional arsenal of Swiss direct democracy and the frequent use of Swiss direct democratic means in Austria,7 we revisit the topic of direct democracy and consociationalism in the conclusion.

The Politics of De-Consociationalism in Switzerland and Austria

The comparative analysis to follow uses the indicators discussed above to assess processes of de-consociationalism in Austria and Switzerland over the past decades.

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7 Austria has held only two referendums, the first in 1978 on the use of nuclear energy, the second in 1994 on EU accession. More frequent were people’s initiatives (39), which, if signed by at least 100,000 citizens, put an issue on the agenda of parliament for deliberation, but cannot force a parliamentary decision.
Figure 1: Effective Number of Parties

The Electoral Arena

Switzerland has traditionally had one of the most fragmented party systems in Western Europe (Ladner 2014), while Austria had for a long time a highly concentrated two-and-a-half party system (Müller 2006). As indicated in Figure 1, until the early 1980s, the effective number of parties (ENP; Laakso and Taagepera 1979) – calculated with shares of votes and shares of seats – was stable in both countries.\(^8\) Party system fragmentation then grew in Switzerland, with a steep increase in the 1991 election, but it subsequently dropped again, and is presently almost the same as in the pre-1980s period. Party system fragmentation in Austria shows a different trajectory. The two-and-a-half party system was gradually replaced from the 1980s onwards by a multi-party system as the formerly dominant pillar parties, the Austrian Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) and the ÖVP, won ever smaller shares of the vote. Austria’s ENP peaked in 2013, and decreased again in the 2017 election due to the short-lived new party Team Stronach. A large drop in 2002 is due to the ÖVP successfully drawing voters from its then deeply troubled government partner, the FPÖ. In terms of party system fragmentation, the two countries came closest to each other in the 2013 election in Austria and the 2015 election in Switzerland. Convergence

\(^8\) Data are from the ParlGov dataset (Döring and Manow 2018) for Switzerland and based on own data for Austria.
has been driven by Austrian voters’ embracing multi-partyism, but the Swiss party system remains the more fragmented one.

Another indicator used in studies of these countries’ party system is the combined share of votes of the four government parties for Switzerland, and the combined share of the ‘traditional’ government parties ÖVP and SPÖ for Austria. In the post-war period the quartet of Swiss government parties has only on three occasions secured less than 80 percent of the votes (in 1987, 1991 and 2011), with the lowest combined share of 73 percent obtained in the 1991 election. Austria’s pillar parties, ÖVP and SPÖ, achieved a combined vote share of about 90 percent on average from 1945 to 1986, and never less than 80 percent. After that, Austrian electoral behaviour rapidly de-pillarised. In 2017 the combined vote share of ÖVP and SPÖ was less than 60 percent for the third consecutive time. It was the ÖVP’s success in that election that helped the metric bounce back to 58 percent from its all-time low of slightly more than half of the votes obtained in the previous election.

Comparatively speaking, both Switzerland and Austria belonged for a long time to the group of European countries with low electoral volatility (Mendez-Lago 1999; Pedersen 1979), which means overall changes in the vote shares of parties across consecutive elections were rather small. That still applies for Swiss national elections, as Figure 2 indicates. The index of net electoral volatility for Switzerland has remained in the single-digit range and been almost constant since the 1970s. Volatility in Austrian elections exhibits more ups and downs, and has been generally increasing since the 1980s. Electoral

![Electoral Volatility](image)

Figure 2: Electoral Volatility

Source: Chiaramonte and Emanuele (2015) and own data
volatility in Austria has, with few exceptions, exceeded the volatility scores of Swiss national elections and crossed the 20-point level twice (1999/2002 and 2013/2017). In Austria itself, these elections have been seen as ‘shocking’ and deeply transformative outcomes. Yet dynamics of electoral change should not be assessed only with regard to the respective national historical record, but also from a wider internationally comparative perspective. We thus added to Figure 2 volatility scores from elections in other countries that are widely seen as ‘party system transforming’ in the political science community. The 1982 parliamentary election in Spain, the 1994 election in Italy, the 2002 election in the Netherlands, elections in countries strongly hit by the 2008 financial crisis as well as Eastern Europeans elections after democratization (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015), exhibited levels of electoral volatility against which levels observed in Austria, and even more so in Switzerland, appear fairly modest. Despite the frenzy of media and scholarly attention to electoral successes of right-wing populist parties in Austria and Switzerland, we concur with Mudde (2013) that in neither country have they led to a fundamental transformation of the respective party system.

The polarization of the party system, based on the polarization index of Dalton (2008) with manifesto-based estimates of Left-Right positions (Volkens et al. 2017) has increased in the period we look at in both countries. Since the early 1980s, there has been a substantial increase in the polarization of the party system in both countries, due to the formation of new parties on the left and the right and/or the large increase of the vote strength of the FPÖ and the SVP (see Figure A2 in the online appendix).

The striking parallels concerning the rise of the Greens as new left parties in both countries are also worth noting. In both Switzerland and Austria the Greens, operating in a context marked by societal attention towards issues of immigration and European integration, have vehemently opposed the populist radical right parties, SVP and FPÖ (Bornschier 2015; Dolezal 2016). Also, ‘in both countries, the Green Eurosceptics have been confronted with the same dilemma: the populist radical right parties dominate the negative discourse of the EU, and the prevalence of identity-related arguments does not leave much room for a genuine Green critique’ (Dolezal 2016: 27). That said, a more detailed comparison of party positions reveals that the parameters of party competition in Switzerland and Austria have been similar yet not identical. While the Greens in Switzerland were in outright opposition to the SVP on all dimensions distinguished by McGann and Kitschelt, the Austrian Greens had a somewhat less exposed position than their sister party in Switzerland, as on economic policy they held a position between the FPÖ and the leftist SPÖ (McGann and Kitschelt 2005: 158).

The role played by policy shifts of the SVP and FPÖ in recent decades was also substantial. In both countries, until the mid-1980s, the relative position of the SVP and the FPÖ were, to a large extent, stable, as well as relatively centrist. However, ever since, both parties have taken a significant, even dramatic, turn to the right (see Figures A3 and Figure A4 in the online appendix), which reflected to some considerable extent the intraparty dynamics and transformations addressed below, and have maintained their relative position as the right-most party since then.

In terms of the share of seats in the legislature held by the ‘pillar parties’ in the two countries, Figure 3 illustrates the pattern of de-pillarization. Until the early 1980s, the combined seat share of the pillar parties ÖVP and the SPÖ in Austria was around 90 percent. Since then, the share has dropped significantly, reaching a nadir of around 54 percent of the seats in parliament after the 2013 election. In Switzerland, the seat share of the four parties which traditionally governed together based on the so-called
‘Zauberformel’ (‘Magic Formula’) has been more stable and virtually always above 80 percent, recovering from a dip below in the early 1990s. However, as can be seen from the lines breaking down the seat shares between the SVP and the other three parties, relative power within the governing coalition has changed significantly, with the SVP going from a seat share of around 12.5 percent in the mid-1980 to 32.5 percent of the seats in the 2015 election, indicating a disruption in the balance of the consociational system.

Given our argument that the SVP and the FPÖ were the key actors in transforming the consociational regime in both countries, it seems justified to take a closer look at the dynamics behind the figures just reported. The gradual transformation of the SVP into a party of the right was intimately related with the leadership of Christoph Blocher. Under Blocher, the party ceased to be just an office- and policy-seeking party; it muted its accommodative posture and replaced it with a more assertive style designed to garner support from new segments of the electorate (Fontana et al. 2006; McGann and Kitschelt 2005). Both parties also challenged the respective national Social Democratic Party’s claim to being the representative of the worker’s vote (Rennwald and Zimmermann 2016). This included winning issue ownership on cultural issues, in particular immigration and European integration (with the most prominent success here coming with the rejection of

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9 Blocher started out as SVP party chairman in the canton of Zurich in 1977; after a number of years in parliament (1979-2003) and as a member of the Bundesrat (2003-2007) he became one of several SVP party chairmen at the federal level in 2008, a position from which he retired in March 2018.
accession to the EEA, opposition to which was led by later member of the Bundesrat Christoph Blocher, whose success in 1992 built not least on the key role he had played in the rejection of UN membership by a 3-to-1 margin in 1986, but not so on economic issues (see Bernhard et al. 2015). The latter marks a major difference to most right-wing populist parties in other West European countries occupying a different ideological position. Unlike for other radical right parties, including the Austrian FPÖ, ‘populist appeals that oppose the “underdogs” to economic elites . . . [are] difficult to reconcile with the party’s neoliberal profile’ (Bernhard 2017: 522). Therefore, the SVP stands out as one of the few parties from that party family that did not reinforce its populist discourse in the face of the ‘great recession’ (see Bernhard et al. 2015; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

The enhanced leverage of the SVP party leadership resulted not least from organizational intra-party reforms that replaced the established amateur organizational model (which hitherto characterized both the SVP and their contenders) by a centralized and professionalized party structure (see Mazzoleni and Rossini 2016). However, the role of individual actors, and their rhetorical leadership, deserves to be considered a factor in its own right. As a recent study by Bernhard (2017: 522–523), analysing party newspaper articles from 2009 through 2015, suggests, there is considerable room for interpersonal variation within political parties regarding the choice of rhetorical approaches and styles. Other things being equal, (non-)membership of an actor in the government makes a difference. Blocher’s role as the SVP’s ‘chief populist’, who belonged to the Bundesrat for just one four-year period, 2003-2007, fits that pattern, and marks a contrast to the much less sweeping and scathing rhetorical style of his party fellow Ueli Maurer, who has been a member of the federal government since 2009.

The peculiar nature of the SVP has remained an issue of constant debate. As Church suggests, the most fitting characterisation of the SVP may indeed be that of ‘a traditional party seeking quasi-revolutionary change’ (Church 2016: 101). While the effects of the SVP’s transformation and electoral rise on the Swiss party system may have been modest by comparative standards (see Mazzoleni 2018), ‘the SVP played a key role in changing the entire culture of political debate among the Swiss parties’ (Vatter 2016: 69). The party’s new style gave the dynamics of party system change, captured by the fragmentation, volatility and polarization scores, a distinct flavour of ‘de-consociationalisation’.

The FPÖ’s development took a similar, but distinct turn: If the SVP for much of the past decades has been ‘Blocher’s party’, the same is true even more so for the FPÖ and Jörg Haider (see e.g. Wodak and Pelinka 2002). Before Haider’s winning the FPÖ party leadership in 1986, the Austrian party system contained no populist parties. Until the late 1970s the FPÖ was a national-conservative party with a programmatic profile of ‘old-right’ elements with a pro-European stance. The early 1980s saw a short-lived ‘liberal blossom’, which helped the party to secure its first participation in national government as a junior partner to the SPÖ. Intra-party discontent with a role as powerless adjunct to the Social Democrats propelled Haider in a crucial party congress vote to the helm of the party (Ennser-Jedenastik and Müller 2014).

When Haider took over, he committed the party to a strategy of unconditional vote maximisation, which included a strong element of personalisation, fuelled by the media’s fascination with his headline-catching soundbites. This more ‘focused’ appearance of the party, build around its leader, strangely contrasted with an opportunistic and diffused programmatic profile. The new prominent, or even dominant, constant in the party’s programmatic profile became its negative position on immigration, where it quickly obtained issue ownership (Meyer and Müller 2014). In other respects, the party repeatedly
shifted its issue positions and issue attention. Among these were ‘the party’s reversal of its position on EU accession and its shifts from pan-Germanic to Austro-patriotic, from anticlerical to traditionalist Catholic, and from liberal to protectionist positions’ (Fallend and Heinisch 2018: 40).

As the country’s most controversial politician, Haider stepped back into the party second row to enable the formation of the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000. In addition to being the party’s first and only Land governor (of Carinthia), Haider remained powerful among the rank and file, though his intra-party control during that period may have been considerably more limited than widely assumed (Luther 2015: 141–143). The FPÖ’s participation in an ÖVP-led federal government (2000-7), and its aftermath, became a showcase of the much-debated transformations of populist parties in government (see Heinisch 2003; Luther 2011). As Luther observed, ‘when the FPÖ moved from populist vote-maximisation to incumbency (in 2000), its office-holding leadership attempted to moderate the party’s populist discourse and behave more like a mainstream party, a move massively resisted by the party grass roots. Once the FPÖ was jettisoned from government, it wholeheartedly reverted to populist discourse’ (Luther 2015: 159).

In 2005, Haider led the separation of the party’s top layers, ministers and MPs, from a discontented, radicalized party base, by founding the ‘Alliance for the Future of Austria’ (BZÖ). Most regional party chapters, except for his own base Carinthia, however, remained faithful to the FPÖ. The BZÖ narrowly managed to re-enter parliament in 2006 and did surprisingly well in 2008, but following Haider’s death shortly after that election, it lost its propelling force and went into decline.

During the great recession starting in 2008, the FPÖ under new party leader Heinz-Christian Strache, and back in opposition, mobilized ‘mainly on the cultural dimension, utilising nationalistic and welfare chauvinist rhetoric; but having moved left on the socio-economic dimension, its rhetoric was also protectionist and anti-globalisation’ (Luther 2015: 159). Competition for a similar voter base with the BZÖ, and in the 2013 election with the newly founded Team Stronach, which had lured MPs from the BZÖ, restrained the FPÖ’s electoral success during that period. The most recent election of 2017 was the first in a decade in which the FPÖ faced no significant rival on the right – resulting in an electoral showing (26.3 percent) close to the party’s all time high of 1999.

The FPÖ’s return to government in late 2017 – which lasted only until May 201910 – was only superficially reminiscent of the earlier experience from 2000-2006. While there has been some ‘backpedalling’ on several issues, and a notable willingness to present party leader and Vice-Chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache, as a more ‘statesman-like actor’, the public discourse in Austria seems to have shifted to the right, as the ÖVP has taken similar positions on the immigration issue during the election campaign of 2017.

The Parliamentary Arena

The first thing to note about Switzerland’s parliamentary arena is that it has gained in importance over the past decades. Structural changes and reforms have turned the Swiss

10 Following a major scandal involving FPÖ party leader Heinz-Christian Strache in May 2019, the coalition between ÖVP and FPÖ broke up. All FPÖ ministers resigned, and the rest of the government, including Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, was ousted in a parliamentary no-confidence vote on 27 May 2019. President Alexander van der Bellen appointed a caretaker government, led by Federal Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein, for the day-to-day governance until parliamentary elections on 29 September 2019.
parliament into a more professional and more modern institution (see Bütikofer 2014). These changes have come to be reflected in an increase in parliamentary activity, in particular in the rise of parliamentary initiatives (Rosset et al. 2018: 218–219).

In terms of de-consocialisation, the most striking development relates to an increase in conflicts, less consensus, and a decrease of large alliances between the government parties (Traber 2015). In contrast to the typical situation in parliamentary democracies, there has never been a culture of closing the ranks between the governing parties as a whole when it came to parliamentary voting on government bills. In earlier decades, most opposition from within the government traditionally came from the Social Democrats, who were the last party to join the ‘club’ of governing parties. Yet, overall, there has been very high amount of support for government bills among the major parliamentary groups (often including the Greens who have never been part of the government). Up to the 1970s, the four governing parties took a unified stance on more than 80 per cent of all popular votes. Since then, however, ‘cohesion has been declining steadily, reaching its lowest point with consensus in less than 20% of the votes during the first and second decades of the 21st century’ (Vatter 2016: 69–70).

Some continuity remains, however: Rosset et al. (2018) offer new empirical evidence for continuity in terms of reasonably high support for governmental bills among the major parliamentary parties (in particular among the Swiss Christian People’s Party (CVP) and the Swiss Liberal Party (FDP)), and the traditional role of the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) as frequent dissenter (often joining forces with Green MPs). What has changed strikingly, however, is the level of support of the SVP: Indeed, ‘the share of votes on which the SVP opposes all the other governmental parties … has been steadily rising in the new millennium to reach almost a quarter of all votes in the 2007–2011 legislative period’, and ‘its level of agreement has steadily declined to below 50 per cent in 2011–2013’ (Rosset et al. 2018: 222–223). The SVP now increasingly ‘plays a dual role by simultaneously participating in government and behaving more and more like an opposition party’ (Rosset et al. 2018: 217), which, curiously, ‘implies a loss of policy influence that contrasts with its electoral successes’ (Rosset et al. 2018: 225). More generally, as Vatter notes, the Rice-Index scores for the National Council (overall and final votes) between 1996 and late 2015 also display a clear trend towards a decrease of parliamentary consensus over the past two decades, and mark a another indicator of an increasingly centrifugal nature of party competition (Vatter 2016). Thus, the developments in this area strongly point toward a politics of de-consociationalisation in Switzerland, and no doubt form part of the larger picture of continuity and change.

As in Switzerland, Austria has in recent decades witnessed a strong, and for some instruments such as parliamentary questions and motions even explosive, increase in activity, driven also by new parties entering parliament. The Swiss National Council had a greater intake of new parties than its Austrian counterpart over the past decades (Bolleyer 2013: 38), but new competitors in the Austrian National Council were larger on average, having enough MPs to get fully-fledged parliamentary Klub status, but nonetheless mostly short-lived.\footnote{The Greens entered the National Council in 1986, the NEOS in 2013 and Liste Pilz in 2017 through elections. By contrast, the Liberal Forum in 1993, BZÖ in 2005 and Team Stronach in 2012 began as parliamentary split-offs.}

During the period of single party governments (1966 to 1983) in Austria, more than 70 percent of successful bills were passed unanimously (see Figure A5 in the online appendix).
Due to the confrontational stance taken by the FPÖ under Jörg Haider on the right and by the Greens on the left, consensus in legislative voting dropped drastically from the 1980s onwards (Andeweg et al. 2008; Konrath 2017). It was at the level of 27 percent under the first SPÖ-ÖVP coalition governments starting in 1986. Despite the initially highly controversial formation of a right-wing government of ÖVP-FPÖ in 2000 and the pillar parties ÖVP and SPÖ occupying separate sides of the parliamentary aisle again, parliamentary consensus (on bills passed) increased again and reached 50 percent during the second ÖVP-FPÖ(BZÖ) government in office (2002-2006) (Müller and Fallend 2004; Müller and Jenny 2013). After the return to SPÖ-ÖVP coalition, the number of parliamentary parties increased further, and unanimity dropped again. After the first year of the current ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in office, the unanimity score stood at 23 percent, indicating a pattern of government-opposition relations similar to that observed at the beginning of the first ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000.

The contrasts in the respective system of government make a comparative evaluation of the amount of change in parliamentary party systems and changes in voting patterns difficult. Both countries observed more parliamentary activity by opposition parties, mostly due to a greater number of opposition parties on the left and right. A correlate of that development was the melting down of the pillar parties to mid-sized parties in the Austrian case, but two-party majority coalitions can still be formed. In the Swiss case the total seat share of government parties has not changed much, but the rank order of government parties by size has changed.

The Executive Arena

To illustrate the change in the executive arena, we calculated the parliamentary seat shares of the governing parties for all governments in the period 1945-2018 for Austria, and 1947-2018 for Switzerland. This is shown in Table 1 (Austria) and Table 2 (Switzerland) (caretaker governments are not shown). As can be seen, until and including the Klaus I government in Austria (1965-66), the government coalition held an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats. However, Klaus III through Vranitzky I (1966-87) always excluded either the ÖVP or the SPÖ. Vranitzky II re-established the grand coalition, which lasted until Klima I (1987-99), but these coalitions held a much smaller majority than what had previously been the case. These governments were followed by the right-wing coalition governments led by Schüssel (2000-07), which were in turn followed by another series of SPÖ-ÖVP ‘grand coalitions’ (Gusenbauer through Kern – 2007-2017), which however commanded much smaller majorities.

In Switzerland, the parliamentary seat shares of the parties making up the ‘Zauberformel’ were relatively stable until the mid-1980s. Since then, there has been an increasing volatility, which eventually came to manifest itself in an altered balance of power in the Bundesrat (Federal Council). A first major change occurred in 2003, when the classic ‘Zauberformel’, established in 1959 was abandoned; while the CVP lost a seat, the SVP gained a second one. By Swiss standards, this marked indeed ‘a minor revolution’ (Dardanelli 2005: 126; see also Kriesi and Trechsel 2008). In 2007, the election of Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, a SVP member, against the wishes of the SVP party, led to a dramatic shift in the government formula, with the SVP excluding both Widmer-Schlumpf and Samuel Schmid, the other SVP member of the Bundesrat, from their parliamentary group. This left the SVP suddenly without representation on the Bundesrat, thereby transforming
Table 1: Government Composition and Parliamentary Seat Shares in Austria

| Party | Figl I | Figl II | Figl III | Raab I | Raab II | Raab III | Raab IV | Gorbach I | Gorbach III | Klaus I |
|-------|--------|---------|----------|--------|---------|----------|---------|-----------|------------|---------|
| BZÖ   |        |         |          |        |         |          |         |           |            |         |
| FPÖ   |        |         |          |        |         |          |         |           |            |         |
| KPÖ   | 2,4%   |         |          |        |         |          |         |           |            |         |
| ÖVP   | 51,5%  | 51,5%   | 46,7%    | 44,8%  | 49,7%   | 47,9%    | 47,9%   | 49,1%     | 49,1%      |         |
| SPÖ   | 46,1%  | 46,1%   | 40,6%    | 44,2%  | 44,8%   | 47,3%    | 47,3%   | 47,3%     | 46,1%      | 46,1%   |
| Sum   | 100,0% | 97,6%   | 87,3%    | 89,1%  | 94,5%   | 95,2%    | 95,2%   | 95,2%     | 95,2%      | 95,2%   |

| Klaus III | Kreisky I | Kreisky II | Kreisky III | Kreisky IV | Sinowatz | Vranitzky I | Vranitzky II | Vranitzky III | Vranitzky IV |
|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|------------|----------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| BZÖ       | 6,6%      | 6,6%       |             |            |          |             |             |               |              |
| FPÖ       |           |            |             |            |          |             |             |               |              |
| KPÖ       | 51,5%     | 49,1%      | 50,8%       | 50,8%      | 51,9%    | 49,2%       | 49,2%       | 43,7%         | 43,7%        |
| ÖVP       |           |            |             |            |          |             |             |               |              |
| SPÖ       | 51,5%     | 49,1%      | 50,8%       | 50,8%      | 51,9%    | 55,7%       | 55,7%       | 85,8%         | 76,5%        |
| Sum       |           |            |             |            |          |             |             |               |              |

| Vranitzky V | Klima I | Schüssel I | Schüssel III | Schüssel IV | Gusenbauer | Faymann I | Faymann II | Kern | Kurz |
|-------------|---------|------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|------|------|
| BZÖ         |         | 6,6%       |              |             |            |           |            |      |      |
| FPÖ         |         | 28,4%      | 9,8%         |             |            |           |            |      | 27,9%|
| KPÖ         |         |            |              |             |            |           |            |      |      |
| ÖVP         |         | 28,4%      | 28,4%        | 28,4%       | 43,2%     | 43,2%     | 36,1%     | 27,9%| 25,7%| 25,7%| 33,9%|
| SPÖ         |         | 38,8%      | 38,8%        | 43,2%       | 43,2%     | 36,1%     | 27,9%     | 25,7%| 28,4%| 28,4%|      |
| Sum         | 67,2%   | 67,2%      | 56,8%        | 53,0%       | 49,7%     | 73,2%     | 59,0%     | 54,1%| 54,1%| 61,7%|      |

Party of Prime Minister (Kanzler) in **bold**. Caretaker governments not shown.
Source: ParlGov (Döring and Manow 2018)
them into an opposition party), for the first time since 1929. 12 In 2008, with the election of Ueli Maurer, the SVP returned to government however, and in 2015, with the SVP recording its best-ever parliamentary seat share, and the Conservative Democratic Party of Switzerland (BDP), failing to retain its seat on the Bundesrat, the ‘new Zauberformel’ (as adjusted in 2003) was re-established, with the SVP regaining its second seat.

What is also worth noting is the increase in the extent to which the SVP parliamentary group became willing to vote against government bills following its spell in opposition (but continuing beyond it). While voting in parliament in Switzerland is less dominated by the government-opposition divide than in other countries (the extent to which does however vary across countries, see e.g. Louwerse et al. 2017), the SVP stands out for its willingness to vote against government bills. While the SVP parliamentary group voted against such bills more often than the other governing parties (which almost always voted for government bills) going back to the late 1990s, by the early 2010s this had increased to voting against government bills around 50% of the time (Rosset et al. 2018). Given that the SVP holds two out of seven seats on the Bundesrat, this is an impressive willingness of a governing party to oppose government policies, as well as a clear indication of the extent to which the broad power-sharing at the heart of consociationalism has declined in Switzerland.

The Arena of Interest Group-Government Relations

The arena of interest group-government relations covers predominantly the pre-parliamentary stage of policy making but also the post-parliamentary stage of policy

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Table 2: Government Composition and Parliamentary Seat Shares in Switzerland

| Party | BR 1947 | BR 1951 | BR 1955 | BR 1959 | BR 1963 | BR 1967 | BR 1971 | BR 1975 | BR 1979 | BR 1983 |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| FDP   | 26.8%   | 26.0%   | 25.5%   | 26.0%   | 25.5%   | 24.5%   | 24.5%   | 23.5%   | 25.5%   | 27.0%   |
| CVP   | 22.7%   | 24.5%   | 24.0%   | 24.0%   | 24.0%   | 22.5%   | 22.0%   | 23.0%   | 22.0%   | 21.0%   |
| SP    | 24.7%   | 25.0%   | 26.0%   | 26.5%   | 25.0%   | 23.0%   | 27.5%   | 25.5%   | 23.5%   |
| SVP   | 10.8%   | 11.7%   | 11.2%   | 11.7%   | 11.0%   | 10.5%   | 11.5%   | 10.5%   | 11.5%   | 11.5%   |
| Sum   | 85.1%   | 87.2%   | 60.7%   | 87.8%   | 87.0%   | 82.5%   | 81.0%   | 84.5%   | 84.5%   | 83.0%   |

| Party | BR 1987 | BR 1991 | BR 1995 | BR 1999 | BR 2003 | BR 2007 | BR 2008 | BR 2011 | BR 2015 |
|-------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| FDP   | 25.5%   | 22.0%   | 22.5%   | 21.5%   | 18.0%   | 15.5%   | 15.5%   | 15.0%   | 16.5%   |
| CVP   | 21.0%   | 17.5%   | 17.0%   | 17.5%   | 14.0%   | 15.5%   | 15.5%   | 14.0%   | 13.5%   |
| SP    | 20.5%   | 20.5%   | 27.0%   | 25.5%   | 26.0%   | 21.5%   | 21.5%   | 23.0%   | 21.5%   |
| SVP   | 12.5%   | 12.5%   | 14.5%   | 22.0%   | 27.5%   | (2)     | 29.0%   | 27.0%   | 32.5%   |
| Sum   | 79.5%   | 72.5%   | 81.0%   | 86.5%   | 85.5%   | 85.5%   | 83.5%   | 83.5%   | 84.0%   |

(1) The BDP was founded in 2008; Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf (formerly SVP) was elected to the Bundesrat in 2007
(2) Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf and Samuel Schmid were excluded by the SVP following the 2007 Bundesrat election
Source: Parlgov (Döring and Manow 2018)

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12 The SVP was formed in 1971 through a merger of the Bauern-, Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei (BGB), which had held a seat on the Bundesrat since 1921, and the Democratic Group. The SVP inherited the BGB’s seat.
implementation. The interest mediation systems of Austria and Switzerland differ along many dimensions due to differences in the political systems’ constitutional setup. Austria’s political system offers significantly fewer veto points in the policy process than the Swiss: it has only weak federalism and a much weaker set of direct democratic instruments. However, the most important contrast concerns the system of government: Austria has parliamentary government, Switzerland a directorial system of government. These two different types of government provide fundamentally different incentives for the executive, the parties and the interest groups. The Swiss government’s creation, composition and survival does not reflect the policy preferences of interest groups. The ‘Zauberformel’ (both the classic form and its modified variant) and the absence of a parliamentary no-confidence motion effectively block these avenues for interest group influence. By contrast, in Austria, survival of a government is based on ongoing support by government MPs, some of whom are at the same time interest group representatives. While party voting unity is traditionally high among Austrian parties, it cannot be taken for granted (Müller et al. 2001), meaning that safeguarding majority support limits government ministers’ leeway. They depend on what their own party MPs and coalition partner MPs will accept. However, linkage between the government and government MPs runs both ways. Elections called ahead of the end of the regular legislative term may put a sudden end to the terms of ministers and MPs. Coalition governments are based on a coalition agreement and are able to pass large scale policy reform packages (Müller 2000). Yet if a government partner blocks policy changes on its own or due to pressure from a politically affiliated interest group, it may also result in stalemate.

In the Swiss directorial system, the linkage between ministers and government supporting parties and intra-coalition discipline is much weaker. Government survival is not at play. The government enjoys nominal support for its bills by a very large surplus majority coalition. The veto referendum and the parliamentary initiative offer pathways for a party in the government coalition, as well as for interest groups, to go for it alone. However, the overall probability of success of such individual attempts is much lower, creating a pattern of punctuated successes of interest groups representing the capital or labour side in passing or blocking change to the status quo.

Swiss peak organizations of interest groups are less closely integrated into the state’s fabric compared to Austria, operating a system of chambers with compulsory membership and autonomy. There are four peak organizations in Switzerland versus three in Austria on the employers’ side as well as several labour union federations compared to the tandem of a labour union federation and a national Chamber of Labour in Austria. Swiss unions have a much lower membership density (see Figure 4 on union density), despite the fact that Switzerland has considerably more and larger multi-national enterprises than Austria, whose economy continues to be characterised by small and medium-sized businesses. Most noteworthy from Figure 4 is the ‘dramatic’ decline in union membership in Austria compared to Switzerland, which leads to convergence on that indicator (Armingeon 2017). There has also been a structural advantage for the employers’ side in Switzerland reflecting the dominance of right parties in the national government compared to a parity of power of right- and left-dominated peak interest organizations in Austria. The two countries have exhibited different trajectories of welfare state development, with Austria reaching higher levels earlier, though a trend towards convergence among welfare states has been identified in recent decades (Starke et al. 2008).

For many observers, neo-corporatism – referring to a particular pattern of interest group-government relations – has marked a longstanding common characteristic of
Austrian and Swiss democracy. Yet both countries have also frequently been seen as ‘most dissimilar cases’ among the set of corporatist countries. In Peter Katzenstein’s (1985) typology Austria was almost the ideal type case of social corporatism, while Switzerland belonged to the sub-group of liberal corporatism. Switzerland has also been repeatedly declared a borderline case of the concept of corporatism. Siaroff (1999: 184) put Austria in the top ranked group of ‘nations considered to be strongly corporatist’ and Switzerland in a group of ‘nations without agreement on placement or even on conceptualisation’. Lane referred to Switzerland’s ‘hidden corporatism (or quasi-corporatism)’ (Lane 2001: 2) and noted that ‘much research has been undertaken on organized interests in Switzerland without arriving at a definitive conclusion whether the country is corporatist or not’ (Lane 2001: 10).

Studies of the triangle of government and interest groups representing the sides of capital and labour in Switzerland stress the government’s role as a mediator, nudging interest groups towards compromise, trying to accommodate conflicting demands to the extent required to evade a post-parliamentary veto through a referendum initiative backed by an unsatisfied interest group. While the government’s majority in parliament is so large that most of the time a government bill passes even when one of the government parties votes against it, successful transformation into law hinges on getting unchallenged through the post-parliamentary period during which a referendum initiative can be fielded. In the Swiss case the labour unions are usually seen as a weaker or ‘junior’ partner in the triangle.

Figure 4: Union Density in Austria and Switzerland (1960-2014)

Source: ICTWSS Dataset v5.1 (Visser 2016)
of government, employer and employee associations that nonetheless occasionally scored policy successes or prevented a policy change by threatening the use of or by employing direct democratic means (Armingeon 1997; Kriesi 2006a, 2006b; Lehner 1984; Oesch 2011).

Switzerland has traditionally been considered an exemplary case of advanced liberal corporatism, which has long stood out for an exceptional amount of stability to be explained by the presence of most of the facilitating and sustaining circumstances, institutions and traditions of European corporatism, and the notable absence of major challenges facing corporatist interest intermediation (Armingeon 1997). More recently, however, these established structures have come under pressure. While systematic comparative assessments suggest that there is more persistence than some observers would seem likely to admit (Armingeon 2011), major elements of change cannot be dismissed. Echoing important earlier work which identified a multi-faceted decline of corporatism in social policy (Häusermann et al. 2004), Sciarini (2015a), in a study looking at a sample of decisions from the first decade of the twenty-first century, found that the pre-parliamentary stage, once the very core of the classic regime of Swiss political decision-making, has significantly lost in importance across the board. His empirical analysis suggests more specifically a marked ‘decline of the two pre-parliamentary procedures that were the cornerstones of corporatist intermediation, namely extra-parliamentary committees and consultation procedures’ (Sciarini 2015a: 47). The relative loss of importance of the extra-parliamentary committees over time has also been demonstrated in a diachronic assessment extending from the late 1950s through 2010 by Beetschen and Rebmann (2016).

Moreover, in terms of the relative weight of different actors, as Sciarini points out, ‘interest groups in general, and peak economic associations in particular, have significantly weakened’ (Sciarini 2015b: 73). More specific findings come from a recent comparative study, in which Christiansen et al. argue, firstly, that in the extra-parliamentary committees, ‘business associations have clearly declined, whereas the position of trade unions remains stable and the number of citizen group representatives has increased’ (Christiansen et al. 2018: 534). Furthermore, also ‘MPs are increasingly linked more closely to citizen groups than to corporatist associations. In 2010, citizen groups represented 59.8 per cent of all leading positions in interest groups among MPs’ (Christiansen et al. 2018: 537). Both the increasing integration of citizen groups in extra-parliamentary committees and their stronger connections with MPs are argued by the authors as driven by the favourable political opportunity structure for citizen groups, including in particular the system of direct democracy (Christiansen et al. 2018: 541).

Describing interest groups’ role in national policy-making in Austria is a variation on the theme of a coming down from corporatism’s heydays in the 1960s and 1970s when tripartite policy-making, the Social Partnership (Sozialpartnerschaft) between the federal government and the peak organizations representing capital and organized labour was in its prime. The traditional ‘Big Four’ social partners – the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ÖGB), the Chamber of Labour, the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Agriculture – have had to cope with competition from new interest groups, parties hostile to neo-corporatist concertation, scandals draining public support for them, and varying government coalitions that impacted on the power distribution between the interest organizations.

In the 1990s, the FPÖ, led by Jörg Haider, called for an end to mandatory membership in the chambers and the reduction of membership dues. Austria’s accession to the
European Union in 1995 was a systemic shock for the national system of interest representation. Policy-making in areas such as agricultural and environmental policy became Europeanized, and the leverage that the Chamber of Agriculture previously enjoyed in cross-sectional bargaining disappeared (Falkner and Müller 1998; Karlhofer and Tálos 1996; Tálos 2015). The social partners’ joint function as an influential macroeconomic policy think tank has similarly vanished (Prapotnik et al. 2015).

Studies of Austrian corporatism stress the interlocking personal relationships between the SPÖ and the ÖVP and a small set of highly centralized interest groups (e.g. Ennser-Jedenastik 2017; Karlhofer 2017; Luther 2017). The SPÖ has had a close relationship with the Trade Union Federation and the Federal Chamber of Labour, with the unions typically taking the lead in political disputes and the Chamber of Labour providing expertise. The ÖVP has enjoyed a close relationship with the Economic Chamber, representing employers, the voluntary Association of Industrialists, which has increased in influence, as well as with the Chambers of Agriculture, whose importance has declined over time. Close party-interest group relationships allowed for negotiations behind the scenes when interparty negotiations were blocked. However, strong opposition by an interest group against a ministerial draft often blocked initiatives at the pre-parliamentary stage, or even at the parliamentary stage (a common lament under SPÖ-ÖVP coalition governments).

Following the 1999 election, the refusal of a Social Democratic MP and union leader to sign the draft of a coalition agreement negotiated between the SPÖ and the ÖVP, provided the latter with a welcome rationale to forge a coalition with the FPÖ instead. The ÖVP concluded that the labour organizations’ opposition to welfare state transformation, or retrenchment, and the watering down of government reform plans would continue as it had in previous SPÖ-ÖVP coalition governments (Khol 2007: 145). In term of public policy, the two right-wing government coalitions from 2000-2006 of ÖVP-FPÖ (replaced by the BZÖ after the FPÖ split in 2005) marked a period of neo-liberal reform of the welfare state (Obinger and Tálos 2006), though reform plans repeatedly floundered when inexperienced or incompetent ministers encountered resistance from interest organizations.

Some continuity remains, however. Some scholars have stressed the resilience of the Austrian social partnership by pointing to examples when the drafting of a bill was left to them (Pernicka and Hefler 2015; Rathgeb 2017), and how during times of economic crises the preferences of the government and interest groups aligned well (Eichhorst and Weishaupt 2013). That said, the government today is clearly in the driver’s seat and the social partners’ core area is now industrial relations. Yet even there – as examples from both the first ÖVP-FPÖ coalition as well as the 2017 to 2019 ÖVP-FPÖ coalition suggest – ministers tend to neglect pre-parliamentary consultation with the politically more distant social partners. Overall, the weakening of organized labour in Austria (Astleithner and Flecker 2017; Karlhofer 2012; Tálos and Stromberger 2004) contrasts starkly with the observed weakening of employer organizations in Switzerland.

### Conclusion

As the analysis above suggests, there has been a very tangible move towards de-consociationalisation in both countries, which stretches across the four arenas distinguished and is to be seen in the wider context sketched out in the introduction. Both countries are to a lesser degree consociational democracies than they were three or four...
decades ago. However, as Table 3 indicates, real and apparent parallels are accompanied by important differences.

In the electoral arena, the changes observed have been significant in both Switzerland and Austria. However, while the amplitude of changes in Austria (both in terms of fragmentation and volatility) has been getting larger, the increase in party fragmentation in Switzerland has been of a temporary nature, and the level of net electoral volatility has remained largely stable.

This corresponds closely with some of the observed developments in the parliamentary arena: The overall strength of the government parties in the Swiss National Council (in terms of parliamentary seats) has remained notably stable over the past decades, which should not let us forget about the significant changes that have taken place amongst this group of parties (with the SVP having nearly tripled their share of parliamentary seats since the early 1990s). By contrast, there have been large losses in terms of parliamentary strength for the SPÖ and ÖVP, the longstanding ‘lead parties’ of the Second Republic. Both countries have also experienced the rise of Green parties, which have come to occupy a particular space in the party system and the parliamentary arena. More importantly, though, the climate and nature of parliamentary politics has changed fundamentally over the past decades in both countries, with the SVP and FPÖ as increasingly powerful players operating largely outside the extant parameters of consensus politics, which can be seen from substantive changes in parliamentary voting patterns, and a changing public rhetoric in parliament (and beyond).

Developments in the executive arena also display major differences: Once considered a unique stronghold of grand coalitions, Austria has seen different governing formats since the early 1980s – a development that contrasts starkly with the ‘readjustments’ of the ‘Zauberformel’ in Switzerland. That said, such a direct comparison, while firmly anchored in the tradition of concept- and indicator-based comparative political inquiry, carries the

Table 3: Summary of Observed Change in Indicators of Consociationalism

| Arena       | Austria                                                                 | Switzerland                                                                 |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Electoral   | Long-term increase in electoral fragmentation, volatility and polarization | Temporary increase in fragmentation in 1991; subsequent return to status quo ante; stable level of net electoral volatility, increase in polarization |
| Parliamentary| Large combined seat share losses for SPÖ & ÖVP. Gains by FPÖ, Greens and other new opposition parties; large drop in unanimous passage of bills in lower chamber | Stable overall level of seat share for the ‘Zauberformel’ parties; gains by SVP and Greens Large drop in consensus levels in lower chamber; large drop in shared stance by all ‘Zauberformel’ parties in popular votes |
| Executive   | Grand coalition reduced to one of several possible options; partial alternation in government | Minor change to ‘Zauberformel’ composition in 2003; BDP (1 seat) 2008-15; return to the ‘new (post-2003) status quo ante’ since 2015 |
| Corporatist | Decline of tripartite policy formulation; government composition shaping the relative influence of interest groups representing labour or capital | Decline of interest groups representing capital; increased use of direct democratic means by other interest and social groups |

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danger of underestimating the dimension of change that the events of the first decade of the twenty-first century meant by Swiss standards, and for Swiss democracy.

Finally, in the arena of interest group intermediation, the once distinctively different patterns have become more similar over time. The overall influence of interest groups on public policy, or at least concerning activities making use of the established channels of representative politics, is decreasing. Moreover, the relative power of different groups in the system has changed. Austria has moved from being an exemplary case of ‘Social Democratic corporatism’ towards the centre of the corporatism scale in Western Europe. Originally situated at the other end of the scale, represented by ‘liberal corporatism’, Switzerland has also moved toward the centre. This convergence notwithstanding, Swiss and Austrian interest group politics have largely preserved their different natures – not only in terms of the relative power of different groups, but also with regard to the strategies applied by interest groups when seeking to influence public policies as they face very different opportunity structures in these political systems.

The summary in Table 3 of our findings regarding the four arenas analysed in this paper clearly suggests that the amount of change has been somewhat larger in Austria than in Switzerland. It remains a different question as to whether or not these changes have made these two cases of the larger group of consociational democracies significantly more similar or more dissimilar than they were 25 years ago. As much as there can be, and have been, different forms of consociational democracy, these may be succeeded by distinct varieties of ‘post-consociationalism’.

A prominent shared feature of de-consociationalisation, and politics beyond the ‘golden age of consociationalism’, in Austria and Switzerland concerns the crucial role of its major right-wing populist parties, the FPÖ and SVP. These parties have been both drivers and immediate beneficiaries of structural change. Further, both parties have largely managed to defend a self-proclaimed status as an ‘oppositional challenger’ of the established regime despite their virtually permanent (SVP) or recurrent (FPÖ) participation in government. While the FPÖ had time to ‘recover’ from holding governmental office, and to revitalize its ‘outsider rhetoric’, the SVP profited from the highly particular nature of opposition politics in Switzerland which is marked by the normative acceptance and empirical realization of governing parties arguing, and acting, against the government.

Perhaps the greatest riddle in terms of the future development of de-consociationalisation in the Alpine region concerns the issue of direct democracy. While some of the SVP’s more recent actions have brought to the fore the anti-consociational potential of direct democracy, the major historical lesson of Swiss democracy would clearly seem to be that direct democracy is a powerful catalyst for consociationalism, rather than a counter-weight to elitist consensus-politics. With that in mind, it marks a curious coincidence that introducing Swiss-style direct democratic instruments in Austria has remained high on the FPÖ’s agenda. One can only wonder if the party is simply not aware of the particular history of Swiss direct democracy, and its distinct nexus with consociationalist governance, or if there is a more conscious strategy of ‘hijacking’ direct democracy to advance an opposite, staunchly majoritarian agenda. Either way, there is reason to believe that direct democracy, if implemented on a Swiss level in Austria, would work significantly differently, and produce fundamentally different results, than it has done in Switzerland (Die Presse 2017; an assessment shared by both political and scholarly observers, see Helms 2015). After all, Austria’s Second Republic is a parliamentary regime with powerful disciplined parties and an institutionalized government/opposition divide, whose competitive edges have been sharpened, rather than softened, in the course of the
‘populist turn’. No less importantly, Austria’s political culture is distinctly different from that in Switzerland. Thus, what might look like an act of diffusion and convergence, could actually become a catalyst for driving Austrian and Swiss democracy further apart than ever since at least the mid of the past century.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

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