

Swiss elect their parliament on Sunday with worries about environment and migration high in minds

By Jamey Keaten | AP

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GENEVA — Swiss voters this weekend elect a parliament that could reshape Switzerland’s executive branch at a time when key concerns include migration, rising health care costs and climate change, which has shrunk the country’s Alpine glaciers.

Final ballots will be collected Sunday morning after the vast majority of Swiss made their choices by mail-in voting. Up for grabs are both houses of parliament.

The main stakes, if pollsters turn out to be right, are whether two Green parties fare worse than they did in the last election in 2019, and whether the country’s centrist party might land more seats in parliament’s lower house than the free-market party — boosting their position in the executive branch.

Polls suggest that the Swiss have three main preoccupations in mind: rising fees for the obligatory, free market-based health insurance system; climate change, which has eroded Switzerland’s numerous glaciers; and worries about migrants and immigration.

The vote could be a bellwether about how another set of Europeans is thinking about right-wing populist politics and the need to spend money and resources to fight global warming at a time of rising inflation that has pinched many pocketbooks — even in well-to-do Switzerland.

The vote for the legislature, which happens every four years, will ultimately shape the future composition of the Alpine country’s executive branch: The Federal Council — which includes President Alain Berset, who has decided to leave government at year-end.

The Swiss president is essentially “first among equals” in the seven-member council, who each hold portfolios as government ministers and take turns each year holding the top job — which is essentially a ceremonial one to represent Switzerland abroad.

Berset, a Socialist, will be succeeded next year by centrist Viola Amherd. The four biggest parties are represented on the council, and they are the right-wing Swiss People’s Party, the Socialists, the free-market Liberals — each with two seats — and the Center party, with one.

Once chosen by parliament, council members — known colloquially as “department chiefs” — can stay in office for life, or as long as they want.

So the council's composition rarely changes a lot: Berset's departure means his seat will be up for grabs among his Socialist siblings.

And if the Center party outscores the free-market Liberals, they could swipe one of the Liberals' two seats on the council.

The two-two-two-one balance of seats in the Federal Council is known as Switzerland's "magic formula" — which is aimed to dilute the prospects that individual personalities get too much power, and to ensure balance in the way government is run.

Add to that Switzerland's direct democracy, by which voters go to the polls — usually four times a year — to vote on any number of policy decisions. Those referendum results require parliament to respond.

Marc Bühlmann, director of the "Annee Politique Suisse" political science institute at the University of Bern, acknowledged Switzerland's electoral system has been engineered from the start to favor stability, balance, and institutional — not personalized — decision-making.

No single political party has had a majority in parliament, he said, so lawmakers of different stripes must work together.

"It's a political system that's almost boring," he said by phone. "My predecessor in this job used to say that during the '50s and '60s, he would pop a bottle of Champagne if two or three (Council) seats got changed."

More broadly, Switzerland has found itself straddling two core elements to its psyche: Western democratic principles like those in the European Union — which Switzerland has refused to join — and its much vaunted "neutrality" in world affairs.

A long-running and intractable standoff over more than 100 bilateral Swiss-EU agreements on issues like police cooperation, trade, tax and farm policy, has soured relations between Brussels and Bern — key trading partners.

The Swiss did line up with the EU in slapping sanctions against Russia over its war in Ukraine. The Federal Council is considering whether to join the EU and the United States in labeling Hamas a terror organization. Switzerland has joined the United Nations in labeling al-Qaida and the Islamic State group as terrorists.

Switzerland, with only about 8.5 million people, ranks 20th in world economic output, according to the IMF, and it's the global hub of wealth management. It's where the world's rich park much of their money to benefit from low taxes and a discreet environment.