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From Corporatism to Partisan Politics: Social Policy Making under Strain in Switzerland

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Abstract

The literature on neo-corporatist agreements in social and labor market policy in the 1990s points to a decline of concertation in European countries with a long-standing tradition of corporatist negotiation. This article identifies a similar trend in Switzerland and argues that three destabilizing factors account for it: 1) retrenchment pressure and ideological polarization prevent compromises; 2) the emergence of new social demands and interests challenges the homogeneity and legitimacy of peak organizations and thus their bargaining power; 3) increasing media coverage tends to open up the traditionally confidential and selective sphere of corporatist negotiation and weakens the social partners' ability to reach agreements.

The impact of these factors on neo-corporatist bargaining is tested in Switzerland, a case where corporatist negotiations used to be particularly decisive in social policy making. Empirical evidence comes from a cross-time comparison of two major social policies: Unemployment insurance and pension reforms in the 1970s and in the 1990s. In the last decade, the main locus of decision-making shifted from the sphere of interest groups to partisan politics. In parliament, the political parties were able to draft bills enjoying wide acceptance thanks to compensations offered to groups particularly vulnerable to new social risks.

Keywords: Switzerland, neo-corporatism, social policy, decision-making process

Introduction

In the recent decade, corporatism has come under strain in countries where stable arrangements used to secure concertation in policy-making between the major interest groups. Although in some - mostly southern European - countries,

new “social pacts” could be established, countries with a long-standing tradition of highly formalized corporatist negotiations, such as Austria, Denmark or the Netherlands, experienced a reverse trend: social partners lost power to the benefit of partisan actors. Talos and Kittel (2002) show that in Austria pre-parliamentary corporatist negotiations have to a large extent lost their central importance, and that the government played a growing role. For Denmark, Blom-Hansen (2001) also points to a weakening of the influence of corporatist actors, because institutionalized tripartite concertation on social and labor market policy has been replaced by more informal consultation mechanisms. He attributes this evolution mainly to the governmental will to cut expenditures, but also to a general decline in the legitimacy of corporatist agreements “reached in smoke-filled rooms rather than in parliament”. In the Netherlands, although social partnership was to a large extent maintained in the 1990s, Anderson (2001) and Slomp (2002) also identified a trend from concertation to less binding forms of consultation after the accession to power of the social-liberal government in 1994. The legitimacy of corporatist negotiations was called into question by the parties in power, which claimed “more responsibility for politics” (Slomp 2002: 243), i.e. the primacy of democratically elected bodies over corporatist boards. We identify a similar trend in social policy reforms in Switzerland during the 1990s. Switzerland is a particularly interesting case since it has always been considered as a country where very powerful interest associations confront weak national political parties and a weak central state, notably in the field of social policy (Kriesi 1980 and 1998). The literature on corporatism in Switzerland has mainly pointed to the stability of policy concertation (Armingeon 1997 and 1998). However, despite the persistence of corporatist negotiations prior to parliamentary debates, the social partners have largely lost their dominant position in policy-making, because they have been unable to reach agreements on several important reforms of basic pillars of the Swiss welfare state. This weakening of the neo-corporatist arena of decision-making coincides with a shift of the main locus of decision-making to the parliamentary arena, which is becoming increasingly active in social policy. The interaction between different arenas (corporatist, governmental, parliamentary) of the policy process has been only marginally investigated in the welfare state literature. Yet we believe this is a promising avenue for understanding the dynamics of social policy reforms.

Our study first seeks to identify the factors which are at the origin of the decline of corporatist arrangements in Switzerland. We examine two major factors emphasized in the literature and we propose a new variable which has, up to now, been largely neglected in research on corporatism. First, pressures for welfare state retrenchment have increased the polarization between competing interests (mainly employers and labor unions) and rendered compromises more difficult (Pierson 2001; Bonoli et al. 2000). Second, it has also been argued that interests are generally

becoming more heterogeneous and that corporatist actors – notably trade unions – are experiencing difficulty in responding adequately to newly emerging social demands, which may undermine their capacity to reach legitimate agreements (Crepaz 1994; Streeck 1993). Finally, a third factor, usually overlooked by specialists of social policy and emphasized by communication researchers, has contributed to increasing difficulties in achieving corporatist arrangements: the transformation of contemporary political systems into “audience democracies” (Manin 1997), where the media play a central role. We hypothesize that increasing media coverage of policy making processes weakens the capacity of corporatist actors to produce compromises, because effective cooperation requires a sphere of confidential negotiation. In the first part of the article, we discuss these three explanatory factors which are expected to account for the declining role of corporatist negotiations and we trace their evolution between the 1970s and the 1990s in Switzerland.

In the second part of the article, qualitative studies on two crucial social policy reforms (pension and unemployment policies), based on documentary analysis and in-depth interviews with key actors of the reforms, allow to assess empirically how the three aforementioned factors influenced the corporatist negotiations, and why there was a shift of the main locus of decision-making from corporatist negotiations to the parliament. The study of these two social policy domains is particularly relevant, because both policies were subject to major reforms in the 1990s as well as in the 1970s, which allows a cross-time comparison of the interactions between the corporatist and the partisan arenas.¹

Corporatist negotiations under pressure

During the period of economic growth, neo-corporatist negotiations appeared to be particularly efficient in dealing with social policy issues. However, in many small European corporatist countries such as Austria, Denmark or – to some extent – the Netherlands, this was no longer true during the last decade, which was characterized by strong pressures for welfare retrenchment (Talos and Kittel 2002; Blom-Hansen 2001; Mailand 2002; Slomp 2002 and Anderson 2001). In Switzerland too, the major interest groups were not able to find an agreement on pension policy reform, nor on unemployment insurance reform. In the following, we analyze the three main explanatory factors for this declining relevance of corporatist concertation for social policy-making.

¹This article is part of a research project “Reshaping decision making processes under external pressure”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant number: 5004-058511/1) and directed by Prof. Yannis Papadopoulos. An earlier draft of this article has been presented at the annual congress of the Swiss Political Science Association, (Fribourg, 8/9.11.2001). We would like to thank the workshop participants for helpful comments.

Welfare state retrenchment and ideological polarization

In times of economic recession, budget deficits in state households, socio-demographic pressures on the pension system, and pressure on taxation and spending levels stemming from increasing global economic competition, the policy objectives of business and labor unions tend to become increasingly divergent. While employers pressure for retrenchment, trade unions emphasize the increasing social demand for welfare provisions in times of crisis. Polarization in discourse and policy positions increases, which makes agreements on reforms more difficult (Pierson 2001; Bonoli et al. 2000; Bonoli 1999). Hence, even though social partners may continue to negotiate on policy reform, they may be unable to agree on a common project.

Evidence on budget deficits and retrenchment pressure, as well as on polarization between the social partners in Switzerland indicates important changes since the 1970s. Rapid demographic ageing and the severe economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s produced, for the first time, large deficits in the realms of pensions and unemployment insurance. In the case of pensions, there were annual surpluses of several billions of Swiss francs until 1992, but they dropped rapidly in 1993 and 1994, becoming deficits for the first time ever in 1995. As for unemployment insurance, the existing system was completely incapable of handling the sharp increase in unemployment in Switzerland at the beginning of the 1990s (from 0.5% in 1990 to almost 5% in 1994, then stagnating at this level until 1997 and declining again to 2% in 2000). Thus, the balance of account dropped from a large surplus to a profound deficit in the mid-1990s.

We also observe a growing polarization of positions between the social partners. Taking as an indicator of polarization the percentage of referendum votes for which the main peak associations of employers (Union of Swiss Employers' Associations, UPS; Small Business Association, USAM) and of trade unions (Federation of Swiss Trade Unions, USS) gave the same voting recommendation, we note in table 1 that divergences considerably increased in the 1990s in comparison to previous years.

An expression of this hardening of positions was a "manifesto for a social moratorium" against any increase in social security expenditures published by the UPS in 1993. In reaction, the trade unions also expressed more clear-cut positions against welfare state retrenchment (Interviews 4 and 5, see appendix).

Table 1: Comparison of the congruence in the positions of the main peak associations ²

	<i>Rate of congruence</i> 1970-1990 (158 popular votes)	<i>Rate of congruence</i> 1991-2000 (106 popular votes)
UPS-USS	0.51 (111 votes taken into account)	0.35 (60 votes taken into account)
USAM-USS	0.36 (125 votes taken into account)	0.23 (76 votes taken into account)

Source: data bank on voting recommendations available at University of Lausanne (Prof. Y. Papadopoulos)

Declining legitimacy of peak associations

The second factor which is likely to weaken the role of corporatist negotiation is the declining legitimacy of employers' and trade unions' peak associations. The recent literature has argued that the representativeness of peak associations is increasingly being questioned for several reasons. The liberalization of international markets tends to reinforce the heterogeneity of business interests, between export-oriented companies and the economic sectors producing for the domestic market, with a negative effect on the internal cohesion of employers' organizations (Keohane and Milner 1996). This trend is, however, less relevant for the field of social policy, since the internal cohesion of business is more deeply affected on issues concerning market liberalization.

As for trade unions, they are confronted with the challenge of representing an ever more diverse constituency of interests. Heterogeneity of interests stems from diverse changes such as the general shift in employment to the service sector, the growth of women's participation in the labor market, the expansion of atypical part-time and short-term employment, or the growing individualization of lifestyles and normative orientations (Streeck 1993: 84). In this context, Pierson (2001: 421) speaks of emerging demands and reforms to "update" the welfare state, i.e. to adapt it to the altering social and labor market structures, to the benefit of new risk groups, such as divorced women, single mothers, part-time workers or the long-term unemployed, which are often insufficiently protected by "old" welfare states. Such new concerns, as calls for gender equality in welfare policies, for instance, tend to blur the traditional class conflict between labor and capital by introducing a value cleavage in social policy debates (Crepaz 1994). Trade unions are challenged by these demands, notably because the new groups at risk rarely belong to their traditional clientele. These factors affect the internal cohesion and the power of trade unions and may thus undermine corporatist bargaining in social policy reforms affected by new social demands.

² The relatively high number of missing values is explained by the fact that social partners do not express voting recommendations on issues which are not of interest to them.

Unlike corporatist actors, political parties are expected to react with more flexibility to these new concerns, notably because of their periodical exposure to electoral competition: "Corporatism is designed to represent material interests. (...) While the parties have eventually caught up with the changes in society, the corporatist system is still lagging behind precisely because of its closed, centralized, hierarchical character" (Crepaz 1994: 47). The result would be an increasing divergence between political parties and corporatist actors, most of all between the social-democratic parties and trade unions.

Indicators measuring the respective capacity of trade unions and parties to take into account new social demands are, unfortunately, virtually absent. A measurable approximation is the reference to the post-materialist dimension of many of the new demands. In order to highlight the gap between the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party in Switzerland with respect to materialism/post-materialism, we rely therefore on the evolution of this cleavage among union members and sympathizers of the Social Democratic Party.³ Already in the 1970s, the social-democratic basis was more open to post-materialist values than trade union members. In addition, more than a third of trade union members affirmed clearly materialist values, while this was true for only a fifth of the social democrats. In the 1990s, this picture has changed in two respects. Firstly, post-materialist values have considerably gained in importance within the trade union membership, which is now rather equally divided between materialists and post-materialists. Secondly, however, materialism has weakened massively among sympathizers of the Social Democratic Party, while post-materialist values have become clearly predominant. These results taken from survey data support the theoretical argument according to which unions are supposed to be still more receptive to materialist concerns and less open to post-materialist issues than parties of the left.

Increasing media coverage

The increasing importance of media coverage, partly linked to growing polarization, is also likely to inhibit compromises in corporatist bargaining. The importance of the mass media has risen sharply in our societies during the last decades. This transformation of mass communications has also had an impact on political reporting. According to Pfetsch (1998), the growing competition between media suppliers gives rise to a kind of political journalism which focuses more on investigation and personalization. With the transformation and

³ These results are based on survey data. For a detailed analysis of the Social Democrats, see Sgier (2002), and for trade union members, see Geissbühler (2000). On the measurement of materialism/post-materialism, see Inglehart (1977).

expansion of their role, the media have become not only a strategic resource for political actors, but also an important political actor in their own right (Kriesi 2001).

We argue that this evolution towards an “audience democracy”, although usually neglected by studies on social policy, also has an impact on the arena of corporatist negotiations. Effective cooperation requires a relatively non-transparent and selective sphere of confidential negotiation, which promotes mutual confidence between social partners (Benz 1998; Papadopoulos 2003). Increasing media coverage, by contrast, heightens the tension between the “logic of influence”, which is compromise-oriented and prevalent among the negotiators of corporatist organizations, and the “logic of membership” that stresses fidelity to the objectives of their respective reference groups (Schmitter and Streeck 1981).

Few data exists on the evolution of media coverage concerning social policy issues in Switzerland. Table 2, however, gives some useful indications. It shows the number of articles on pension reforms and on unemployment policy that were published in a selection of the most important Swiss German newspapers during the periods when these issues were prominent in the media.

Table 2: Number of press articles on social policy reforms

<i>Pension policy</i>		<i>Unemployment policy</i>		<i>“Future of the welfare state”</i>	
8 th reform of pension system	1970-72: 101 articles	introduction of mandatory insurance	1976: 13 articles	Before 1990	0 articles*
9 th reform of pension system	1977-79: 58 articles			After 1990	104 articles
10 th reform of pension system	1994-95: 112 articles	1 ordinary reform, 2 urgent reforms	1992-97: 205 articles		

Source: data bank “Kommunikationsereignisse 1920–1997”; www.foeg.unizh.ch; the data bank covers the 20 most important issues for each of 5 major German-speaking newspapers. Importance is measured by the number of articles published every year on a specific issue.

* This absence is related to the fact that the future of the welfare state has become an important issue in the newspapers only since the early 1990s. Thus, this topic does not appear before in the data set which includes only the 20 most prominent issues.

According to this data, the pension issue has had a high profile in the media in the past too, given the relatively widespread media coverage of the two major reforms of the 1970s.⁴ Nevertheless, what is special about the most recent reforms is that they were already a prominent issue during the pre-parliamentary negotiations between 1985 and 1988 (32 articles), while for the

⁴ The 9th reform was mainly about the financial consolidation of the pension system. Because the scope of that reform was narrower compared to the 8th and to the 10th reform, we do not analyse it in detail.

previous reforms the issue was mostly covered only during the parliamentary and referendum phases⁵. As far as unemployment policy is concerned, we note a striking increase in media coverage. This policy field was only sparsely covered when mandatory insurance was first introduced, but it became one of the most central media issues in the 1990s. Another striking difference in comparison with the 1970s is the emergence of important general discussions in the media on the future of the welfare state. Before the 1990s this topic never featured among the most important issues. So, there has indeed been an overall increase in media coverage of social policy issues since the 1970s, which has been largely confirmed by our interviewees. All of them explicitly stated that the influence of the media on the reform processes has grown considerably over the last decade. The director of the employers' association UPS, for instance, deplored the fact that nowadays almost every session of the pre-parliamentary committee is followed by a press conference, with the consequence that the social partners continually have to comment publicly on their interim results and to reiterate their objectives (Interview 7, see appendix). After this, they have to return to the negotiation table, where a different, consensus-oriented logic should prevail. The leader of the USS trade union also noted that the media have become a more important actor in their own right, and that the social partners must keep them informed on the negotiations at ever earlier stages of the reform processes (Interview 3, see appendix).

Thus, the evolution of the three explanatory factors considered (growing retrenchment pressure and polarization, the decline in the representativeness of peak associations, increasing media coverage) highlights important changes between the 1970s and the 1990s in the context of corporatist negotiations.

Changing roles of negotiation arenas: Evidence from two major social policy reforms

The declining relevance of corporatist negotiations between social partners in Switzerland is particularly striking, since the literature has traditionally identified them as the decisive stage in Swiss decision-making processes (Kriesi 1980; Zehnder 1988; Poitry 1989 and Sciarini 1999). In this pre-parliamentary corporatist arena, interest organizations, experts and bureaucrats negotiate in specialized committees. Bills are drafted in these expert committees before they are handed over to the governmental and parliamentary arena. Zehnder (1988) has shown that between 1971 and 1974, only about one third of these bills have

⁵ The pre-parliamentary corporatist negotiations took place in 1969-70 for the 8th reform (18 articles) and in 1976-77 for the 9th reform (10 articles) of the pension system.

subsequently been modified in parliament, and not more than 6,4% of them have been modified substantially. In general, the earlier a point of intervention was situated in the decision-making process, the more important it could be considered (Kriesi 1980), a finding that points out the dominant position of the corporatist actors as opposed to political parties.⁶ In addition, opponents can challenge every law adopted in parliament by gathering 50'000 signatures for a popular referendum in the direct democratic arena. The threat of launching a referendum exerts a pressure for compromise-seeking from the very beginning of the process onwards. Hence, the predominant role of pre-parliamentary corporatist negotiations has often been explained by the existence of the referendum as an important veto point in the Swiss political system (Neidhart 1970).

The four decision-making processes in pension policy and unemployment insurance analyzed in this article are of particular relevance, not only because both the pension scheme and unemployment insurance were subject to reforms in the 1970s as well as in the 1990s, but also because all four reforms were of major importance. The *8th pension reform* as well as the *introduction of a constitutional article on employment insurance in 1976* belong to the most important reforms of the 1970s, as identified by Kriesi (1980). Similarly, the *10th reform of the pension scheme* and the *reform of unemployment insurance* (both adopted in 1995) had high prominence on the reform agenda of the 1990s and constituted turning points in both fields of social insurance.⁷

The 8th reform of the old age pension scheme in 1972 and the adoption of a new constitutional article on unemployment insurance in 1976 perfectly illustrate the traditional Swiss decision-making patterns outlined above. When comparing them with the two reform processes on similar issues in the 1990s, we find important changes.

The reconstruction of the decision-making processes of the 1970s is based on secondary literature. As to the reform processes of the 1990s, on which this article is focused, our case studies are based: a) on public and confidential

⁶ As Kriesi (1980: 589) puts it: "Ganz allgemein kann man sagen, dass dem Parlament, und damit dem Parteiensystem, dessen Fokus im Staat das Parlament darstellt, bestenfalls die Funktion eines Korrektivs zukommt". On the basis of network analysis, he identified the most important collective political actors in Swiss decision-making during the 1970s, and found that the four major peak economic associations (with the government) ranked above the political parties. Similarly, among the "inner circle" of the most influential individual actors (27 persons), there are only four "pure" parliamentarians (without any leadership function in interest groups), compared to 9 representatives of the peak economic associations and 12 administrative or governmental actors (Kriesi 1998: 282 and 288).

⁷ Old age pension and unemployment policy figure also prominently in Bonoli's (1999) study of Swiss welfare state retrenchment.

documentary sources such as the governmental “message” to the parliament, minutes of the meetings of expert and parliamentary committees, plenary parliamentary debates, expert reports, publications of political parties and interest associations, and b) on 11 elite interviews with the key actors of the two decision-making processes (see appendix for a list of the interviews).

Before explaining in more detail the changing patterns of decision-making in the 1990s, we provide in this chapter a brief comparative overview of the four reform processes. The departure from traditional decision-making patterns is presented for the corporatist arena in a first step and for the role of parliament in a second step.

The corporatist arena: from compromise to deadlock

The main goal of the 8th *pension reform* of 1972 was to increase basic pensions significantly to a level allowing the beneficiaries to have a decent standard of living (for more details on this reform, see Kriesi 1980 and Binswanger 1987). The social partners and the cantons negotiated the reform in the pre-parliamentary federal expert committee. An agreement was reached within about one year between the defenders of an 80% rise and those fighting for the doubling of the existing pensions and the bill was unanimously approved by the members of the committee. Similarly to pension reform, the *unemployment insurance reform* of the 1970s was based on a broad consensus among the social partners, since the main objective of generalizing insurance coverage remained largely uncontested (for more details on this reform, see Kriesi 1980 and Bonnebault et al. 1995). Concertation took place in an ad hoc expert committee, which included representatives of business and labor unions, cantonal governments and private experts. After about one year of negotiation, this committee adopted a proposal for the creation of a mandatory federal insurance financed through equal contributions from employers and employees. To strengthen this agreement, the social partners even jointly published a statement in which they appealed to the parliament for rapid enactment of the reform.

In contrast to the pension reform of the 1970s, pre-parliamentary negotiations for the 10th *reform of the Swiss pension scheme* were fastidious and much longer. This reform was supposed to introduce gender equality in the old age insurance, since the previous system generally disadvantaged married women who lost their earned entitlement to a pension in favor of the husband’s entitlement, a system that created severe financial problems particularly for divorced women. Left-wing political actors as well as women’s organizations thus urged for a so-called “splitting-system”, in which the contributions of both spouses would be added, divided by two and counted separately. Additionally, right-wing political actors demanded a rise in the retirement age for women

from 62 to 65, initially for reasons of gender equality, but increasingly because of financial pressure on the pension system. During the pre-parliamentary corporatist negotiations (from 1985 to 1989), the social partners failed to reach an agreement in the federal expert committee. The negotiations were blocked on the issue of the age of retirement, on which trade unions and business organizations were in direct opposition. In 1987, the Federation of Swiss Trade Unions (USS) and the Social Democratic Party chose to “go public”, claiming retirement at sixty-two for both sexes in a widely diffused publication,⁸ while the Radical Democratic Party and the Union of Swiss Employers’ Associations (UPS) published a statement in favor of generalized retirement at 65.⁹ The issue of “splitting”, for which both actors had shown a certain interest, became of only secondary importance in the shadow of the controversy on the age of retirement. “Splitting” was also criticized by employers, who feared the increase in administrative costs. For the trade unions, on the other hand, the question of the retirement age became predominant, since it directly concerned union members, whereas “splitting” was mainly targeted at women absent from the labor market and not unionized. The draft bill finally handed over by the government to the parliament reflected the failure of pre-parliamentary compromise-seeking, since it contained only very minor amendments, leaving aside the issues of “splitting” and the equalization of the age of retirement.

A similar failure of pre-parliamentary compromise-seeking can be observed in the case of *unemployment insurance reform*. Reacting to the sudden increase in unemployment in the beginning of the 1990s, the parliament adopted in 1993 an emergency decree raising the number of daily compensation payments and reducing the replacement rate from 80% to 70%. This emergency decree was opposed by the trade unions as well as the employers’ organizations in a popular referendum vote, since the former rejected the reduction of benefits and the latter demanded more severe cuts. Nevertheless, the emergency decree was accepted by a large majority of the voters in autumn 1993. This decisional process had a significant impact on the regular reform of unemployment insurance, since the pre-parliamentary negotiations for this second reform took place parallel to the referendum campaign on the emergency decree. In this campaign, the social partners continually restated in the media very clear-cut, antagonistic positions on the level of unemployment benefits. This made compromise-seeking for the new bill difficult, since the negotiations were stuck on roughly the same elements as those of the emergency decree

⁸ PSS/USS, *Droits égaux dans l’AVS. Propositions du PSS suisse et de l’USS pour la révision de l’AVS* (Bern: PSS/USS, 1987).

⁹ PRD, “Avenir de l’AVS. Rapport final d’un groupe de travail du PRD suisse,” *Revue Politique* 67, no. 2 (1988): 34-45.

(lengths of entitlement period and replacement rate). Given the deadlock in the negotiations, the government went on to present a draft bill to the parliament which again included most of the controversial elements on which negotiations had failed. Unsurprisingly, this project met with heavy criticism from the social partners and the political parties.

This brief presentation shows that while in the 1970s, inclusive negotiations between the social partners in the pre-parliamentary corporatist arena resulted into broad agreements, compromise-seeking in similar negotiations among the social partners largely failed in the 1990s, which had important implications also for the role of parliament.

The parliamentary arena: from passive approval to decision-making

When the pre-parliamentary agreement on the 8th *pension reform* was debated in parliament, the broad lines of the reform had already been drawn and thus, it was approved rapidly and unanimously in 1972 after just one single debate in both parliamentary chambers. Quite similarly, the pre-parliamentary agreement between the social partners on the *introduction of a mandatory federal unemployment insurance* decisively pre-structured the debates in parliament, where the bill was ratified within only a few months without significant modification. Thus, while the pre-parliamentary negotiations had taken more than one and a half year, both chambers and their preparatory committees finished the debates in less than 7 months and approved the bill unanimously.

Since a consensual corporatist agreement lacked for the 10th *reform of the pension system*, parliamentary debates became far more important than in the 1970s. In addition, the advocates of “splitting” had a much better stand in parliament than among the social partners and hence, this issue became predominant. After about 18 months of debates, the parliamentary committee of the lower chamber reached an agreement on “splitting” and on educational benefits. This proposal was strongly supported notably by the Radical Democratic and by the Social Democratic Parties. Hence, a “social-liberal coalition” in parliament was able to foster an agreement on this novel issue. Some members of the Radical Democratic Party, however, then raised again the demand for a rise in women’s retirement age, which was set, after brief but controversial debates, at sixty-four by a right-wing majority against the Social Democratic Party. The trade unions, for whom the age-issue was clearly predominant, launched a referendum against the pension reform, forcing the Social Democrats to clearly define their priorities, because a popular rejection of the law would also imply losing the benefits of “splitting”. The Social Democratic Party finally decided in favor of “splitting”, i.e. in favor of the parliamentary agreement and against the referendum. In the end, only the trade unions opposed the reform which was largely accepted by the voters.

The parliament acquired a similarly important role in the *reform of the unemployment insurance*, on which the social partners had failed to negotiate a compromise, so that trade unions and employers' organizations remained firmly opposed to the governmental proposal. Therefore, the parliamentary committee of the lower chamber brought the corporatist actors back to the negotiation table and orchestrated an entirely new compromise. The complete reorientation of the reform towards an active labor market policy allowed both trade unions and employers' organizations to give their consent to the new reform package. The new compromise combined the extension of the entitlement period with obligations for the unemployed to take part in active labor market programs in order to be eligible for further payments. After the new compromise had again been put into question by the cantons who feared important cost increases, the parliamentary committees of both chambers organized common negotiations together with the social partners, members of cantonal governments and top civil servants, where a final compromise could be reached. The bill was finally accepted by all political parties, the social partners and the cantons.

The two reform processes of the 1990s show that major changes in social policy have increasingly been decided in the party-parliamentary arena instead of remaining under the pre-parliamentary control of the social partners. This weakening of corporatist bargaining is related to factors such as retrenchment pressure, polarization, media coverage or the declining legitimacy of peak associations. We first seek to further substantiate this explanation in the next part, before explaining the leadership role taken over by the parliament.

Explaining the weakening of corporatist negotiations

The factors accounting for the increasing difficulty in compromise-building are to some extent interrelated. Retrenchment pressure leads to polarization of discourse, which is sustained by media interest. This contributes to the increasing inability of peak associations to reach widely accepted compromises. In addition, the declining representativeness of corporatist actors tends to undermine their legitimacy.

Retrenchment pressure, polarization and media coverage

In both reforms, retrenchment pressure and polarization were conducive to deadlock in the pre-parliamentary corporatist negotiations. Switzerland was confronted in the 1990s with very low economic growth and rising social expenditure in the fields of unemployment insurance and old age pensions. Such a context creates a need to increase social benefits while requiring a tighter

control of public expenditure (Bonoli et al. 2000). These divergent pressures favored a very polarized political climate in Switzerland where corporatist actors defended unusually hard-line positions in the media.

In the pension reform, the positions taken on the retirement age were too divergent to make any agreement possible. Moreover, the age issue became an extremely high profile topic in the media during the 1990s. The Social Democratic Party and the trade unions as well as the Radical Democratic Party and the employers chose a “going-public” strategy, affirming in widely diffused publications their firm positions on retirement age and fostering thereby a widespread debate in the newspapers (see also table 2 above). This early publication of the negotiation positions made concertation on the issue particularly difficult, since every concession would have been easily interpreted by the media and by the rank-and-file as a sign of weakness. By choosing an early “going public” strategy, the social partners themselves reduced their chances of reaching a compromise on old age pension reform.

The trade unions’ and employers’ positions on how to react to the unemployment crisis were also very polarized. While the unions demanded an increase in benefits for the unemployed, employers’ organizations mostly wanted to enhance the pressure on unemployed people to accept any new job as quickly as possible. In addition, the parallel media campaign concerning the referendum on the emergency decree in 1993 meant that the main issues on which no agreement could be found were already being heatedly debated in public. The director of the federal Office of Industry, Crafts and Labor confirmed this polarizing effect of the parallel media campaign (Interview 2). He stated that the social partners were caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, they advocated intransigent positions in order to reject the emergency decree, while on the other hand, they had to negotiate on the very same issues in order to reach a compromise for the new bill. Thus, the corporatist negotiations were blocked on these “hot” issues. The subsequent reorientation of the reform towards an active labor market policy, by contrast, facilitated compromises, mainly because it allowed social partners to maintain their polarized discourse: the active labor market measures could be seen either as a *right* of the beneficiaries to have access to vocational training, a claim raised by trade unions, or as their *duty* to “deserve” compensation benefits (workfare), a point on which employers insisted heavily (Interviews 4 and 7).

The intransigence of the social partners in both reform processes should be seen in the context of a more general polarization of discourse in Swiss corporatist relations of the 1990s. The claim for a less consensual attitude on the part of the employers was raised in two “white books”, published in 1991 and 1995, which presented programs for neo-liberal reforms in economic and social policies (for more details, see Mach 2004). These books were published by major economic leaders of the largest export-

oriented Swiss companies. In reaction to these white books, the Swiss Federation of Commerce and Industry (USCI) provided a more radical message in favor of market liberalization and welfare state retrenchment.¹⁰

Compromise-seeking in the pre-parliamentary negotiations was then hampered by the overall polarization, which was reinforced by the strong media coverage of the reforms. Nevertheless, the growing polarization did not bring into question the social partners' participation in negotiations on social policy reforms in expert committees. Trade union leaders, top civil servants and the director of the UPS affirmed that they remained open to negotiation on the reforms, and that they never attacked the existence of corporatist decision-making as such, even if no agreements could be found (Interviews 2, 3, 5 and 7). The deadlock in both cases, however, highlighted the difficulties experienced by the representatives of trade unions and employers' organizations in reconciling an increasingly confrontational attitude expressed in the media and towards their members ("logic of membership") with the day-to-day negotiation of social policy reforms in the corporatist arena ("logic of influence").

The declining role of social partners

A further explanatory factor for the failure of compromise-seeking in the pre-parliamentary corporatist arena is the declining legitimacy of peak organizations due to the emergence of new social demands and groups at risk which the social partners, principally the trade unions, have difficulty to integrate. It was mostly in the pension reform that the growing heterogeneity of preferences became very important in explaining the new patterns of social policy-making. The trade-off between protecting the traditional trade union clientele – mainly male labor market insiders – or protecting new groups at risk – mainly female labor market outsiders – divided the left and fostered new reform coalitions in the parliamentary arena.

In the case of pension reform, new social demands for a better individual old age protection of women strengthened the heterogeneity within and between the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party. In line with Crepaz' (1994) and Streeck's (1993) arguments, the trade unions were unable to adequately take into account the new demands to "update" the welfare state. Gender equality and improved old age insurance for (divorced) women gained sufficient support only in parliament, when broad factions of the Social Democratic and the Radical Democratic parties, as well as some female representatives of the trade unions, insisted on the "splitting" of contributions and pensions between husband and wife. As "splitting" is a demand rather independent of labor market participation

¹⁰ The USCI represents the employers mainly in economic and fiscal policy issues, whereas the UPS deals primarily with social and labour market policy.

and a gender issue rather than a traditional issue of material redistribution, it remained a secondary point for employers and unions compared with the retirement age.

In the case of unemployment insurance reform, a newly created association of unemployed people defended very clear-cut left wing positions that the USS had difficulty to represent in the negotiation arena. At the end of the decision making process, this single issue actor even tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to launch a referendum against the new law. Its claims weakened the internal cohesion of the left and in particular of the trade unions. The latter were not accustomed to the claims of labor market outsiders, since unemployment had always been virtually non-existent in Switzerland.

It is interesting to note that both reforms for which we observed a reconfiguration of decision-making patterns converged towards the provision of compensations for new social groups at risk, instead of the traditional beneficiaries of public welfare. The reform of unemployment insurance was focused on the creation of active labor market measures in favor of the long-term unemployed, and pension reform mainly benefited women with insufficient old age protection due to interrupted employment biographies. Hence, both types of compensation were not clearly targeted at the core categories of trade union members. New groups at risk tend to have different advocates from the traditional beneficiaries of social policies, a fact that paves the way for new dynamics of reform in this policy field. Partisan actors, for instance, are less closely linked to the traditional constituencies of the welfare state. Therefore, the shift from the corporatist arena to the parliament also had important implications for the content of the reforms.

The rising role of partisan politics

The declining importance of the corporatist arena of policy making raises questions about the redistribution of power towards alternative arenas of decision-making, such as the government or the parliament. In most other small European neo-corporatist countries, the decline of corporatist compromises was combined with a reinforcement of the governmental position in policy-making. In Switzerland, however, it was in the parliamentary arena that the main elements of the reform packages were introduced.

The strengthening of the parliamentary arena

Several factors explain the increasing importance of the parliamentary arena in Swiss decision-making. Firstly and most importantly, not only had the social partners failed

to elaborate a viable bill proposal, but so did the government. While it assumed in both reform processes a certain *procedural* leadership by ending the corporatist negotiations even though no compromise had been found, it never assumed leadership on the *substance* of the reforms. Instead, the government maintained a traditional intermediary position between the social partners by proposing very limited reforms in order to avoid strong opposition (in particular through a referendum). In the case of pension reform, the government did not dare to propose a rise in women's retirement age to the parliament without counterbalancing this measure of welfare retrenchment by any expansive elements, such as "splitting" (Interview 1). It was at the same time reluctant to propose a "splitting" model to the parliament, not least because the Christian Democratic minister in charge of the reform privileged the traditional scheme based on the married couple as the basic unit of insurance. This dilemma resulted in a heavily criticized "minimal" reform draft. As to unemployment insurance reform, the inability of the government to innovate was partly due to a question of timing, since the active labor market measures the federal administration had started to work on were not sufficiently developed when the social partners negotiated on the new bill (Interview 2). Hence, given the context of crisis, the government proposed a draft bill for the unemployment insurance reform that remained very close to the status quo.

These limited governmental reform drafts were not able to respond to the demands of the social partners, neither were they appropriate given the salience of the problems to be resolved. Thus, not only did the government not contribute towards breaking the deadlock in the corporatist negotiations, but its proposals mirrored or even amplified this deadlock. In both cases, the social partners and large sections of the main political parties rejected the very limited governmental proposals. Getting ever closer to the referendum phase, the pressure for reaching a widely accepted reform proposal increased. In this context, the parliamentary committees re-launched the negotiations and were able to reformulate the governmental bills completely. While in periods of welfare expansion, the threat of a referendum facilitated early compromises in the corporatist arena, in a context of retrenchment pressure, corporatist actors are less willing to accept concessions and compromises (Bonoli 1999). As trade union leaders said, in a polarized context such as in the 1990s, stronger pressure than usual is needed to be able to come to an agreement (Interviews 3 and 4). Hence, compromises must all the more be found at a later stage of the policy process, notably in the parliamentary phase when the referendum threat becomes most imminent.

More generally, it appears that although the existence of multiple veto points in Swiss politics is primarily considered to hamper efficient decision-making by raising transaction costs between negotiation partners, this is not the only effect veto points may have. Veto players able to launch and win referenda have several points of access to the decision-making processes. If their claims are not taken adequately into account in the corporatist arena, they can reintervene in the parliamentary arena through MPs who are sensitive to their demands. This increases the risk of policy blockades,

but can also offer new opportunities to avoid them. The duplication of decisional circuits can be considered as a mechanism of “institutional redundancy” (Bendor 1995; on Switzerland see Ossipow 1994), which is a device helping to avoid failure in the functioning of a (political) system by enabling an arena to take over an issue when solutions could not be found in a previous arena. Redundancy may then have a creative potential: it increases the opportunities for reforms.

It was notably the case of pension reform that revealed a second element explaining the increased importance of parliament. Political parties proved to be more open to value-based new social demands such as - in that case - gender equality, than the social partners. It was the strong interest of the Social Democratic and the Radical Democratic MPs in improving the old age protection of married and divorced women with interrupted employment careers that allowed these parties to foster a social-liberal reform coalition in parliament. Such a reform agreement had not been possible in the previous corporatist arena. This is evidenced by the divergent positions between the Social Democratic Party and the trade unions on the referendum against the bill. Trade unions supported the referendum because they primarily wanted to avoid the rise in women’s retirement age at the risk of losing the benefits of the “splitting”, while the Social Democratic Party privileged the reverse order of priorities. The argument was also confirmed by our interviews. A leading social-democratic trade unionist said that it was easier to convince the leaders of the Social Democratic Party of the importance of “splitting” than trade union leaders, mostly because the main beneficiaries of the “splitting” were women who had not been active on the labor market. Similarly, a social-democratic member of the parliamentary committee that drafted the “splitting” model also stated that parties were more open to new social demands than interest organizations (Interviews 5 and 10). Thus, it was only in the parliamentary arena that a solution could be reached with the adoption of the “splitting” model in exchange for raising the retirement age.

Finally, other cases of recent social policy reforms, such as the labor law reform of 1996, the recent reform of the mandatory occupational pensions, the 11th reform of the basic pension system and the introduction of financial support for day-care facilities for children followed similar patterns of power redistribution.¹¹ Pre-parliamentary negotiations between social partners also failed to provide a satisfactory agreement, and in parliament the governmental proposals were reformulated to a very large extent. In addition, more aggregate studies on the role of parliament also point to the growing importance of the parliamentary arena as a decisive locus for decision-making in Switzerland. Compared to the legislature of 1971-75, the overall percentage

¹¹ For more details on the labor law reform, see Mach (2004); on the reform of mandatory occupational pensions, see Häusermann (2002); on the 11th reform of the basic pension system, see Fischer (2002); on the introduction of financial support for day-care facilities for children, see Ballestri and Bonoli (2003).

of governmental proposals modified in parliament has increased from 39,7 to 44,1% between 1991 and 1995 (Linder 1999: 203). Furthermore, Jegher (1999) shows that the parliament has become more active especially with regard to social policy issues: between 1995 and 1997, about two thirds of the social policy bills have been amended, while this was true for only about 35% of the total number of governmental proposals (for a similar argument, see also Lüthi 1997).¹²

The Swiss case in comparative perspective

The weakening of the traditionally predominant role of the major interest groups in social policy-making has also been observed in other small corporatist countries such as Austria, the Netherlands or Denmark. In these countries, it was the government that became a central actor for reform. Relying less than usual on the consent of the social partners, it decided more autonomously and “emancipated” itself from the neo-corporatist bargaining circuit (Talos and Kittel 2002; Slomp 2002; Blom-Hansen 2001).¹³ In Switzerland, by contrast, it was the parliament which took over the role previously played by corporatist actors. Hence, its new role in policy-making is rather surprising from a comparative perspective. Although this aspect is rarely discussed in the comparative literature, we can provide some explanations for this divergent pattern of power redistribution. The particularity of the Swiss case cannot be due to any significant difference in terms of executive-legislative balance, because all the small European countries considered in the literature belong to the category of consensual democracies where the executive does not on the whole dominate the parliament (Lijphart 1999: 248). Instead, two major arguments can explain the atypical Swiss situation.

First, as explained above, the threat of the popular referendum as a Swiss particularity exerts a pressure for compromise-seeking on the decision-making

¹² Lüthi and Jegher mainly explain the rising role of parliament with the replacement in 1992 of ad hoc parliamentary committees by permanent and specialized committees. This institutional explanation confirms and reinforces our argument on the strengthening of the parliament in the 1990s. It applies, however, only to the case of unemployment insurance reform, since the parliamentary committee in charge of the pension reform was set up on the previous, “ad hoc” basis. In addition, to appreciate the respective importance of the executive and the legislative, it is also necessary to distinguish between different policy fields. In the highly internationalized field of regulatory policy, for instance, governments have been strengthened at the expense of interest organizations and parliaments, which can largely be explained by their strategic position simultaneously on the external and on the domestic scene (see on this issue Moravcsik 1994 and on Switzerland Mach et al. 2003).

¹³ See, however, Keman (1993) for a diverging interpretation of the Dutch case, where he argues that governmental partisan politics have always been predominant in the Netherlands.

process. In times of welfare retrenchment, those agreements are found only at the latest possible stage in the policy process, in the parliamentary arena, when the referendum threat is most imminent. Second, although Switzerland has a coalition government typical of Lijphart's "consensual" democracies, the Swiss federal government does not act on the basis of a real governmental program with clear-cut objectives previously negotiated by the coalition parties. Hence, the government is not under pressure to take measures compatible with such a program, and lacks the necessary legitimacy resources to act in such a way, because the governmental parties do not feel constrained by a common agreement. This can explain the weak role of the government in welfare reform in Switzerland.

Conclusion

During the 1990s, in the field of social policy, negotiations between the social partners in the pre-parliamentary neo-corporatist circuit became increasingly difficult compared to the 1970s. Further, we identified a substitution of early corporatist compromises by multiparty agreements reached in the parliamentary arena. Several factors explain the failure of negotiations between trade unions and employers' organizations in the two cases of pension and unemployment policy. Pressures for welfare state retrenchment resulting from economic recession, budget deficits and socio-demographic factors accentuated the divergence of objectives and the polarization of discourse between the corporatist actors. Moreover, media pressure contributed to a radicalization and a hardening of their positions. As a result, these actors were unable to reach agreements in the corporatist arena, not only because of the overall polarization of positions, but also because of their inability to respond adequately to new social demands for "updating" the welfare state (Pierson 2001), such as claims for gender equality in the case of pension policy.

As to the shift of the main locus of decision-making from the pre-parliamentary corporatist arena to the party-parliamentary arena, the two case studies reveal a rather complex picture. Corporatist compromises which used to prevail in the 1970s were not simply replaced by inter-party agreements fostered in parliament. As shown in the case of pension reform, the outcome was not so much a consensual agreement, although it was supported by all decisive political parties, but consisted of a strategically tied-up package of extensive and restrictive elements (Bonoli 1999), on which the trade unions and the Social Democratic Party were divided. In the case of unemployment insurance reform, the drawing up of the final compromise in the parliamentary phase necessitated

the participation of actors other than the parties, including again the social partners. The innovative compromise achieved was to a large extent jointly the work of the main actors of both negotiation arenas, namely the corporatist actors and the political parties.

The reform processes revealed a surprising flexibility in Swiss decisional procedures confronted with crisis management. Armingeon (1998) argues that the institutions of corporatism and consociationalism, which are deeply rooted in Switzerland, still provide a favorable framework to cope with the challenges of changing socio-economic circumstances. We found that in major social policy reforms, partisan consociationalism proved more effective for problem solving than interest groups' corporatism. In general, the literature on corporatism and on policy concertation focuses on trade unions, employers' organizations, or more recently on the government as key actors, but it often does not pay much attention to the role of the parliamentary arena. This can be explained by the fact that parliaments are generally considered as places where corporatist agreements are routinely ratified. Although in other small corporatist countries it was mainly the government, as opposed to the parliament for Switzerland, whose role was strengthened, these countries seem to exhibit similar patterns of change in terms of an enhanced role for political parties, as opposed to interest organizations and corporatist bodies. In the recent literature on welfare reforms, the role of partisan politics has been reasserted (Green-Pedersen 2001 and Ross 2000). Our article on Switzerland sought to identify how parties come to matter: because they encompass wider interests than the corporatist actors, and because they act under the imminent shadow of the referendum, they tend to gain influence on social policy issues. We believe that it should be checked in further comparative studies – particularly in the field of social policy, a traditional domain of social partners concertation – whether it is partisan executives or parliaments that are becoming more powerful players than interest groups. Furthermore, research should not only be focused on the newly empowered governmental or parliamentary arena, but should also scrutinize its interactions with the corporatist arena and explore the reasons for possible changes in them.

Appendix: *List of elite interviews*

All interviews have been conducted between June and August 2001.

- 1) Vice-director of the *Federal Office of Social Insurance (OFAS)*. Responsible for the pension reform of 1995.
- 2) Director of the *Federal Office of Industry, Crafts and Labour (OFIAMT)*. Responsible for the unemployment insurance reform of 1995.
- 3) Secretary of the *Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (USS)*. Responsible for the unemployment insurance reform of 1995.
- 4) Secretary of the *Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (USS)* (1993-94). Responsible for the pension reform of 1995.
- 5) President of the *Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (USS)* (1994-98) and member of the parliamentary committees in charge of the pension and the unemployment insurance reforms of 1995 for the *Social Democratic Party (PSS)*.
- 6) Director of the *Union of Swiss Employers' Associations (UPS)* (1970-93) and member of the parliamentary committees in charge of the pension reform of 1995 for the *Radical Democratic Party (PRD)*.
- 7) Director of the *Union of Swiss Employers' Associations (UPS)* (1993-). Responsible for the unemployment insurance reform of 1995.
- 8) Chair of the parliamentary committee in charge of the unemployment insurance reform of 1995 for the *Christian Democratic Party (PDC)*.
- 9) Member of the parliamentary committee in charge of the pension reform of 1995 for the *Christian Democratic Party (PDC)*.
- 10) Member of the parliamentary committee in charge of the pension reform of 1995 for the *Social Democratic Party (PSS)*.
- 11) Member of the parliamentary committee in charge of the pension reform of 1995 for the *Radical Democratic Party (PRD)*.

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Von Korporatismus zur Parteipolitik: Sozialpolitik unter Druck in der Schweiz

Die neuere Literatur zur Entwicklung neokorporatistischer Abkommen hat für eine Reihe von westeuropäischen Ländern mit einer langen Tradition korporatistischer Verhandlungen eine Schwächung der Konzertierungsmechanismen in den 1990er Jahren im Bereich der Sozial- und Arbeitsmarktpolitik festgestellt. In dies Artikel zeigen wir für die Schweiz eine ähnliche Tendenz auf und führen diese auf drei Faktoren zurück: 1) Finanzieller Druck auf die Sozialwerke und ideologische Polarisierung verhindern die Kompromissfindung; 2) das Aufkommen neuer sozialer Bedürfnisse und Forderungen stellt die Homogenität und Legitimität der Dachverbände in Frage und schwächt insofern ihre Verhandlungsmacht; 3) zunehmende mediale Abdeckung der Entscheidungsprozesse bricht die traditionell geschlossene und selektive Sphäre der korporatistischen Verhandlungen auf. Dies erschwert das Aushandeln von sozialpartnerschaftlichen Abkommen. Der Einfluss dieser Faktoren auf den

Entscheidungsprozess wird für den Fall der schweizerischen Sozialpolitik untersucht, in der die Sozialpartner immer eine sehr wichtige Rolle gespielt haben. Die empirische Untersuchung basiert auf einem longitudinalen Vergleich zweier wichtiger Felder der Sozialpolitik: es werden Reformen der Arbeitslosenversicherung und der AHV in den 1970er und 1990er Jahren verglichen. Dabei wird deutlich, dass sich der entscheidende Ort der Politikformulierung von der vorparlamentarischen Arena der Verbände in die Arena der Parteipolitik verschoben hat. Im Parlament gelang es den Parteien, breit abgestützte Vorlagen zu formulieren, insbesondere durch den Einschluss von Kompensationen an gesellschaftliche Gruppen, die von neuen sozialen Risiken besonders stark betroffen sind.

Du corporatisme à la politique partisane: les politiques sociales sous pression en Suisse

La récente littérature sur les arrangements néo-corporatistes dans le domaine des politiques sociales et du marché du travail a mis évidence un déclin de la concertation dans les pays européens avec une longue tradition de négociations corporatistes. L'article identifie une tendance similaire en Suisse, qui peut être expliquée par trois facteurs: 1) Pressions au retranchement des politiques sociales et polarisation idéologique qui rendent plus difficiles les compromis; 2) Emergence de nouvelles demandes sociales qui déstabilise l'homogénéité et la légitimité des organisations faitières et qui remet en cause leur pouvoir de négociation; 3) Une couverture médiatique de plus en plus forte qui rend plus transparente la sphère des négociations néo-corporatistes et affaiblit la capacité des partenaires sociaux à trouver des solutions de compromis. L'impact de ces facteurs est analysé pour le cas suisse dans le domaine des politiques sociales, où les partenaires sociaux ont toujours joué un rôle central. L'analyse empirique porte sur une comparaison diachronique des réformes de deux politiques sociales majeures: l'assurance-chômage et l'AVS durant les années 1970 et 1990. Au cours de la dernière décennie, le lieu décisif du processus de décision s'est déplacé de la phase pré-parlementaire des négociations entre partenaires sociaux à l'arène partisane. Au Parlement, les partis politiques furent capables de formuler des propositions de réforme soutenues par une large coalition, grâce aux compensations octroyées aux groupes sociaux particulièrement vulnérables par rapport aux nouveaux risques sociaux.

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