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The Next Switzerland: The Country's New Political Geography Goes Without the Röstigraben

To debate:

▶ **What does geography have to say on political polarization?**

▶ **How can network analysis be applied to territorial analyses?**

▶ **What collective political behaviour tells us about social transformations?**

▶ **How can science teach us to accept the diversity of political viewpoints?**

Cultural diversity and political stability are historical trademarks of Switzerland. This paradox makes of the country a success story of modern democracies. On many social and political questions, cultural frontiers between linguistic groups have been known to divide the nation. A recent study conducted at the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne suggests that these frontiers are disappearing. Switzerland is over with the "Röstigraben".

Political Divisions Are Functional Divisions

In the days that follow federal participatory votes in Switzerland, politicians, journalists and researchers alike comment national results and cantonal outcomes in the search for explanations. Through this hasty exercise, these specialists try to identify which sociological or cultural attributes best describe regional variations in the percent of "yes" and "no". Historically, divergence between linguistic groups, religious denominations, and cities and villages have provided good explanations on why areas of the country vote so differently. These analyses have reinforced the idea of the so-called "Röstigraben", a cultural boundary predominantly between German-speaking and French-speaking communities. The language frontier would manifest itself through different preferences in many aspects of everyday life such as culinary taste, design culture and political choices. From a social point of view, the Röstigraben illustrates how tight relationship can be between language, culture and political behaviour. This also raises profound questions on the association between political ideologies, moral values and the everyday life.

"The Röstigraben [...] raises profound questions on the association between political ideologies, moral values and the everyday life."

In 2016, Switzerland is very different from what it was in 1848, when the Swiss people and their cantonal representatives have adopted the first Federal Constitution. To a large extent, the country is also very different from what it was fifty, or even thirty years ago. Living and working in different communes or cantons is increasingly frequent. Today, most commuters work outside of their commune, and a good share outside of their canton. Same goes for leisure activities which make almost half of the travels distances accomplished each year. Swiss are increasingly likely to make friends, marry or work with foreigners too. The number of non-national permanent residents has almost doubled between 1980 and 2010. The social media, Wi-Fi and 4G connections also contribute to increase people's interactions with distant others. These transformations do not affect all part of the country equally but in general, there has been an exponential growth in connectivity between people and places, both within the nation and with the rest of the World. It is a dynamic that impacts greatly the way Swiss people use their democratic institutions.

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Exploring the Network Structure of Political Agreement and Disagreement

A good example of this is the geography of political polarization. Over the last thirty years, political agreement between local communities have radically evol-

ved. Certain local communities that use to agree over federal participatory votes now tend to disagree, while others that use to disagree on political issues now tend to agree more. These changes are not arbitrary, but follow urbanization and globalization processes, and the increase in connectivity between people and places. For example, looking at the evolution of political agreement and disagreement among Swiss communal populations with "network analysis" provides a good understanding on the political preferences of local communities and the geography of those preferences. The evolution of communities' political network reveals how these cultural transformations affect the Swiss political landscape. To measure political agreement and disagreement between communal populations says a lot on social, economic and cultural transformations in Switzerland, as the country leans towards a fully new geographic configuration in political polarization.

A Crumbling Röstigraben

What we see now is the recent disappearance of the Röstigraben as a political divide between regions of the country. Up until the nineteen-eighties, communal populations agreed mostly with others of the same linguistic region. Linguistic regions were themselves fragmented in smaller groups. With lower connectivity between local populations, less exchange between people, the majority of voters made political choices similar to those of neighbouring communes. This dynamic evolved rapidly and in the nineties, communal

votes flatten out across in each linguistic region. All over Romandie, majorities of voters in every commune began to express the same political choices, pointing to an increase in regional consensus. In the German-speaking part of the country, this dynamic translated into two larger groups: larger cities and their suburbs, on the one hand, and smaller rural communes, on the other hand.

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After 2003, this process accelerates and creates a new type of organization: there is a complete disappearance of the linguistic divide. Larger Swiss cities, Romandie and Ticino now produce very close political choices, mostly opposing those of the German-speaking suburban and countryside locations. Populations in the most urban places, and those that belong to linguistic minorities reach higher consensus on political issues. Suburban populations make other choices, and so do inhabitants of the more remote places of the country. ▶
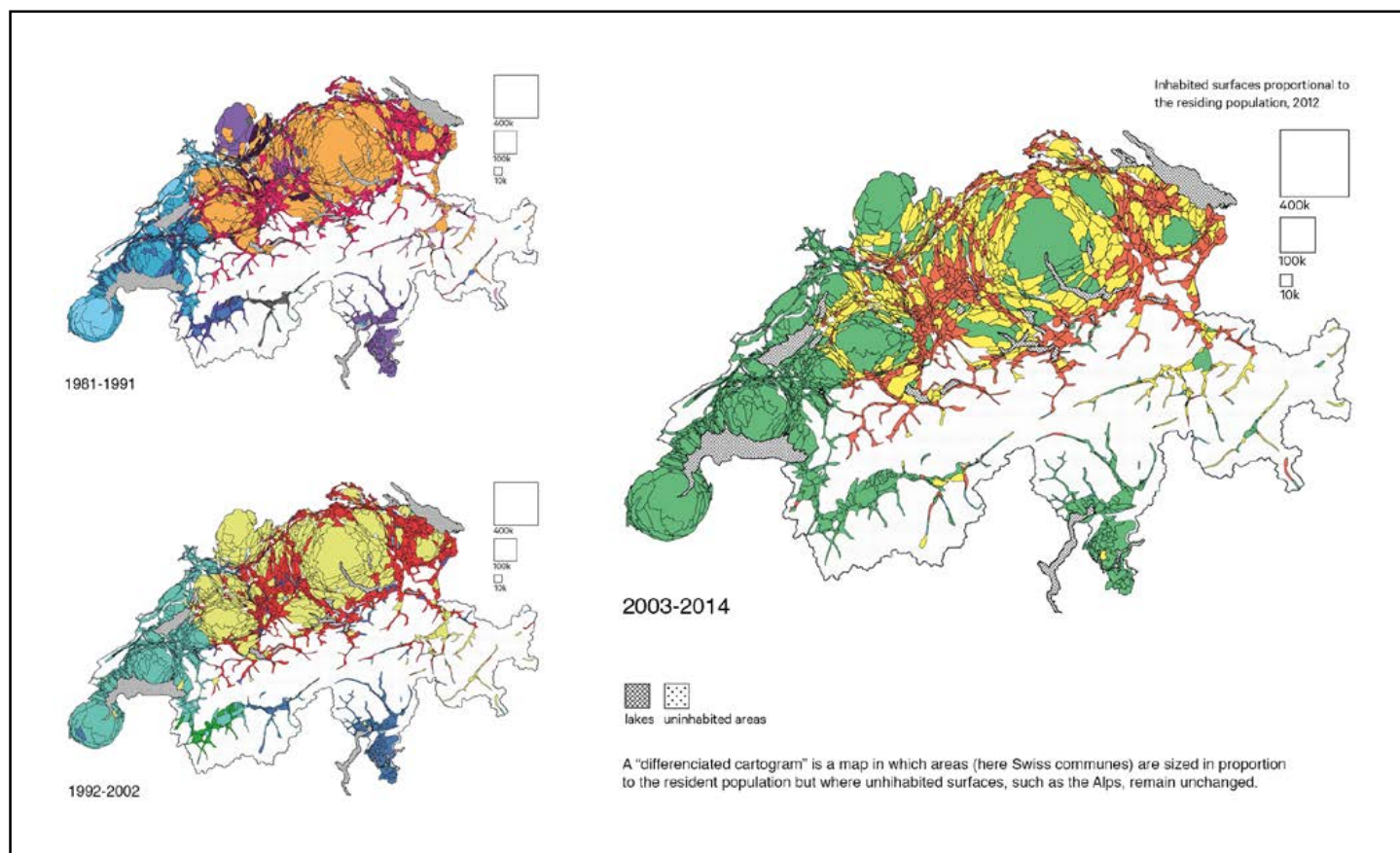
Evolution of the political agreement between communal populations on federal votes (map: Shin Alexandre Koseki)

"Every day social and physical contexts afford difference opportunities, and those are what conduct political choices."

New Political Horizons

The disappearance of the Röstigraben is not the only result of cultural globalization. Communal populations agree more today than they used to and political choices are flattening out across the country. The exact causes of this increase in consensus remains, however, to be addressed. Other factors such as strategies by political parties, or even constitutional limitations of the democratic institutions may also influence the apparent greater consensus. Many new questions arise from these observations, questions that can only be answered to with in-depth qualitative research work.

There is a necessity to re-engage with the spatial dimension of political actions, and the relationship that exist between individual's context and their ideologies. Individuals' socio-economic characteristics cannot alone explain people's political preferences, especially today. Every day social and physical contexts afford difference opportunities, and those are what conduct political choices. Current transformations of political behaviours across both hemispheres highlight the role of values as collective strategies to foster individuals' empowerment. As researchers, we must stop problematizing political preferences, and begin to look at them for what they are: manifestations of people's capability to use affordances they perceive in the realisation of their aspirations.

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Annual cantonal votes or "Landgemeinde" in Appenzell Innerrhoden, April 2016, (photo: Shin Alexandre Koseki)