

## ZURICH JOURNAL

## Idea of 'One Person One Party' Makes for a Crowd in Switzerland

ZURICH — When Matthias Pöhm formed his new Swiss political party, he was determined to reach out to what he considered an underrepresented group. So in May, he created the [Anti PowerPoint Party](#), whose stated mission is to advocate for those souls “who, every month, are obliged to be present during boring presentations in companies, universities, or at other institutions, and who had up to now no representation in politics.”

People are thinking, “This is a waste of my time,” Mr. Pöhm said of those presentations, which he described with an expletive. His party made it onto the ballot for [Switzerland's](#) national parliamentary elections, which will be held Oct. 23. “They needed a leader.” Single-issue political parties on the fringe seem to be gaining popularity these days; [the Pirate Party](#), for example, which concerns itself with Internet freedom, won 8.9 percent of the vote in Sunday's elections in Berlin. But Switzerland, which may be the world's most direct democracy, takes fringiness to an entirely different level. Here, any citizen over the age of 18 can start a political party. To get on the ballot for Parliament's lower house, all a party needs are 100 to 400 voter signatures, depending on the size of the canton.

Thanks to this low threshold, and an open, pluralistic political system, Switzerland has a tradition of colorful splinter parties, usually based in the larger, more urban cantons of Zurich and Bern. (A classic is the Auto Party, organized in 1985 to raise speed limits and limit traffic fines.) While the Auto Party [made it to Parliament](#), most splinter groups have next to no chance of winning. Still, they reflect “the will of people to actively participate in the election process,” wrote Mark Stucki, spokesman for the Swiss parliamentary services, in an e-mail.

Take Thomas Märki, a 43-year-old insurance broker who was disturbed by the cows he saw penned up on a farm he passed every day on the way to work. “I started to do some research, and I saw that the laws about treatment of animals are not well enforced,” he said. In July 2010, he created the [Animals' Party Switzerland](#) “to give animals a voice in politics.”

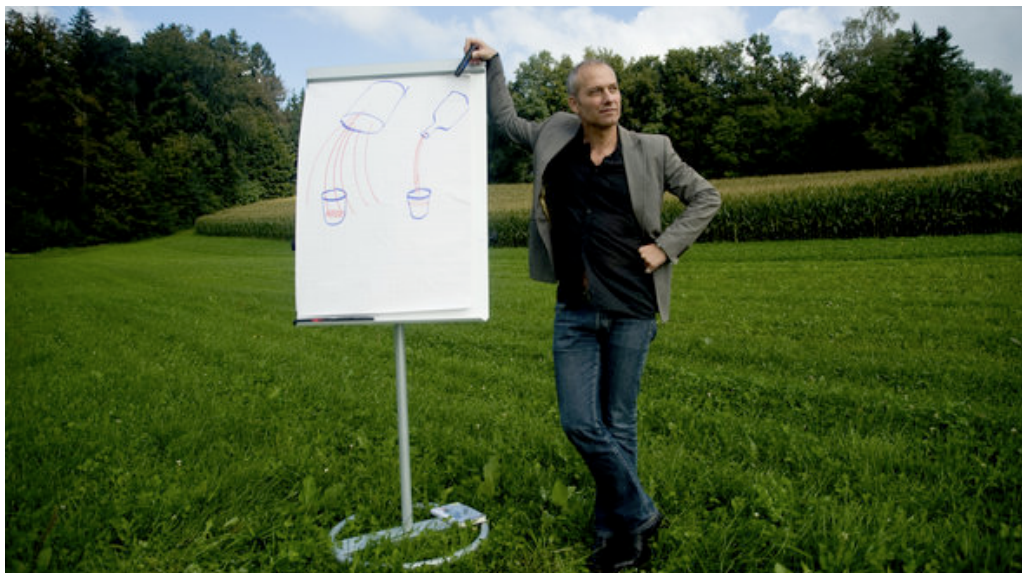
For a political newcomer, navigating the bureaucracy to, say, determine when it is legal to hang billboards has been hard, he said. But with 27 Animals' Party candidates on ballots in four cantons, Mr. Märki plans to keep working even if they do not win anything this time around.

Alfredo E. Stüssi, president of [Subitas](#) (formerly the Men's Party), is equally committed to his cause: Equal rights for men. Mr. Stüssi, who was unable to see his daughter for many years after separating from her mother, said Subitas got on the national ballot this year thanks to some creative thinking. “Somebody said, ‘Why don't you go to a soccer game?’ We did, and that's where we got 70 percent of our signatures.”

For Hanspeter Kindler, a poet, getting the Swiss Fool's Party on the ballot was a political end in itself. Angry at the slow progress of a popular initiative to restrict top management salaries at public companies, he started up his one-man, no-issue party this year. “The main goal I had was to make a strong point,” he said. “I'm realistic enough not to campaign.”

But Mr. Pöhm's Anti PowerPoint Party, whose platform wobbles between banning PowerPoint outright and just making people aware of the presentation software's communicative shortcomings, puts a new twist on the splinter tradition.

“This is a misuse of the elections for a commercial purpose,” said Thomas Widmer, chair of Swiss Politics at the University of Zurich. “It's the first time I've seen this in Switzerland. It raises the question of whether there should be legislation forbidding such practices.”



Matthias Pöhm leads the Anti PowerPoint Party. It made it onto the ballot for Parliament.

Mr. Pöhm, who makes a living running public-speaking seminars, specializing in the art of the pithy retort, readily admits his campaign is a marketing gag — though he says it is precisely this kind of honesty that would make him a good politician. (Since his visibility in Zurich is low, and his only marketing materials are as-yet-undistributed campaign vomit bags, this will likely remain an untested premise.)

Something like the Anti PowerPoint Party “is the price of democracy,” said Christoph Pfluger, a journalist and magazine publisher who co-founded [partefrei.ch](#) (Party-Free Switzerland) three months ago, for people who have no use for party politics. (“It was very easy,” he said. “We had the idea, sent out cards for membership and posted it on the Internet.”)

But others are generally critical of the splinter phenomenon. “These parties are usually gone six months after the election. They reflect a mood,” said Claude Longchamp, a political scientist and pollster based in Bern. “I am so against them because for the voters, they make things really complicated.”

Well, yes. Each ballot consists of a multipage series of lists of candidates by each and every party. In Zurich this year, there are 30 lists of up to 34 candidates each (Zurich has 34 seats in the lower house) that voters choose from. Voters can also write in the individual candidates of their own choice, from any party. This year there are close to 3,500 candidates running for the 246 seats in the two parliamentary houses.

Still, it is not all jokes and quixotic quests. The [Green Party of Switzerland](#) is an example of a group that started small and, broadening its platform, succeeded in entering the mainstream.

This, according to Professor Widmer, might one day be a possibility for another newcomer, the Swiss Pirate Party, which got a major lift from the success of its Berlin cousin.

A computer science student, Denis Simonet, 26, co-founded the party two years ago. “Before, there was no party that spoke for me,” said Mr. Simonet, who described a dizzying plunge into political life. He says he and his co-founders learned about politics from the ground up, fielding press calls, meeting with Swiss politicians and, he said, even offering asylum-seeking advice to Julian Assange of WikiLeaks. So far, they have won a city council seat in Winterthur and have a total of 57 candidates on the ballots in the national elections.

“The cool thing is that we make some people, especially young people, interested in politics,” said Mr. Simonet, who clearly relishes his responsibilities. “It's a very important part of our existence, to show them there's some hope!”