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The Swiss Confederation a brief guide

2024

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CH info



“We cherish what we value. And we can only value what we know.”

Federal Chancellor Viktor Rossi

Dear Reader

Perhaps you have already had a chance to see the Swiss comedy *Bon Schuur Ticino*? The film humorously plays on key elements of our direct democracy, and also on the importance of Switzerland’s different linguistic cultures in our political system. It shows us what we already know; that our system of direct democracy is alive and a work in progress. Against the backdrop of social change and progress, it is continuously evolving and thrives on the fact that the status quo can be called into question. That possibility is built into the system. If a majority of the people and the cantons consider it appropriate, changes are made.

What is important is that we understand one another across our nation’s linguistic boundaries. However, understanding one another does not just mean translating what the other person says into our own language, but also recognising our fellow human beings and the culture associated with their language, and reflecting this in our political institutions.

If we are to continue to proudly present our system of direct democracy and political institutions at home and abroad, we must take good care of these fundamental achievements. We cherish what we value. And we can only value what we know.

The ‘Swiss Confederation – a brief guide’ is intended to help you get to know Switzerland, our direct democracy and our political system (even) better. The brochure is published in German, French, Italian, Romansh and English – maybe you will be inspired to take home a copy in a language other than your own...

Happy reading!

Federal Chancellor Viktor Rossi



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**This publication reflects the status at the editorial
deadline (26.01.2024). Latest figures and information
can be found on the websites mentioned.**



Complementary resources to accompany the brochure:

- CH info app for smartphones and tablets
- Website www.ch-info.swiss
- Teaching material
- Barrier-free PDF for the visually impaired



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Switzerland

Around 86,000 18-year-olds live in Switzerland: a good three quarters of them are Swiss and just under a quarter have foreign citizenship.

On turning 18, Swiss citizens have the right to vote and take part in federal elections and referendums.

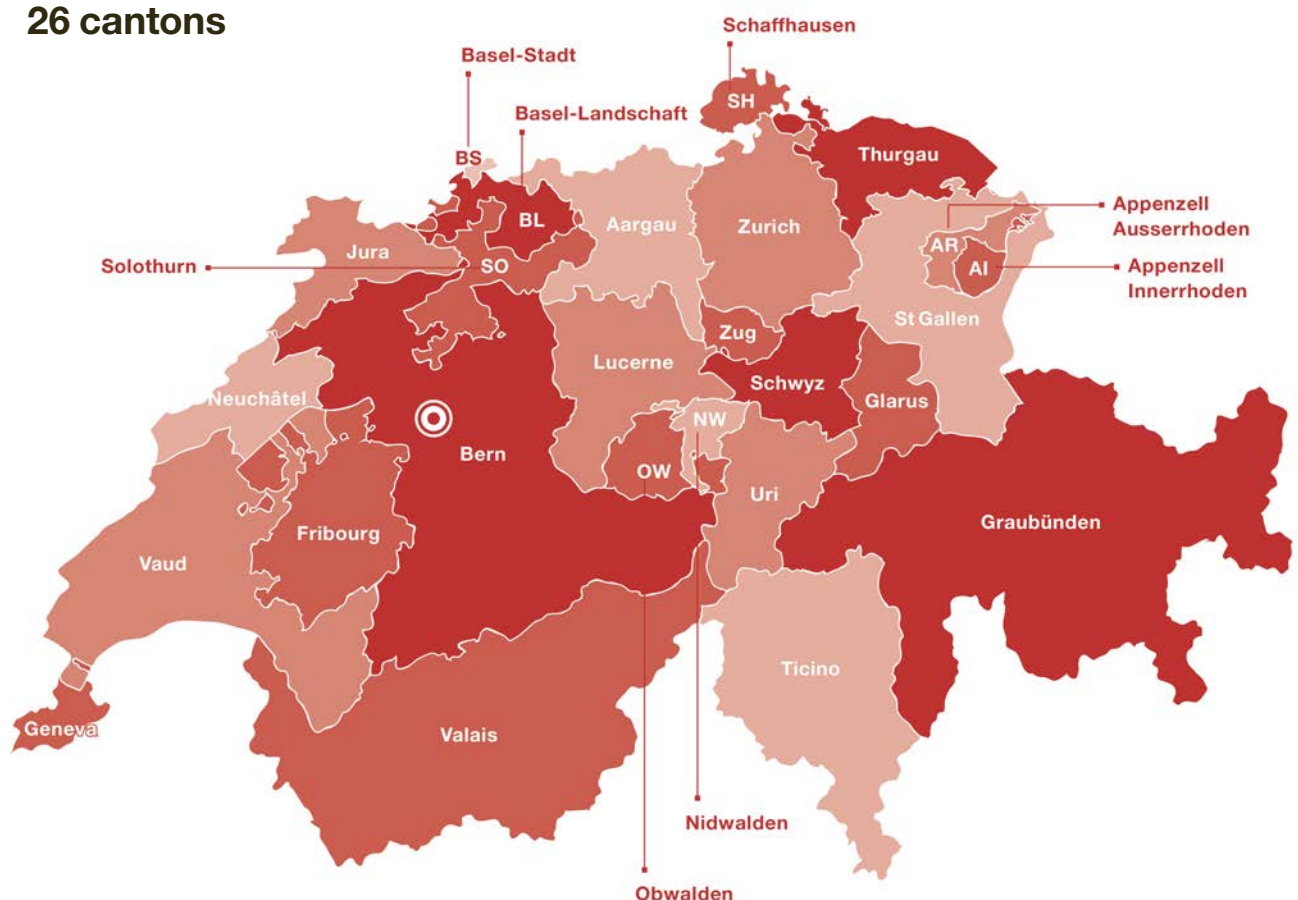




Switzerland

Switzerland is a small country with a population of 8.9 million people. It has 4 language regions and 26 cantons, which are largely independent and consist of numerous local authorities or communes. Multilingualism and federalism have their roots in the past, yet still shape Switzerland today. Its neutrality is recognised by all states of the world.

26 cantons



Statistics about Switzerland

8.9 million people

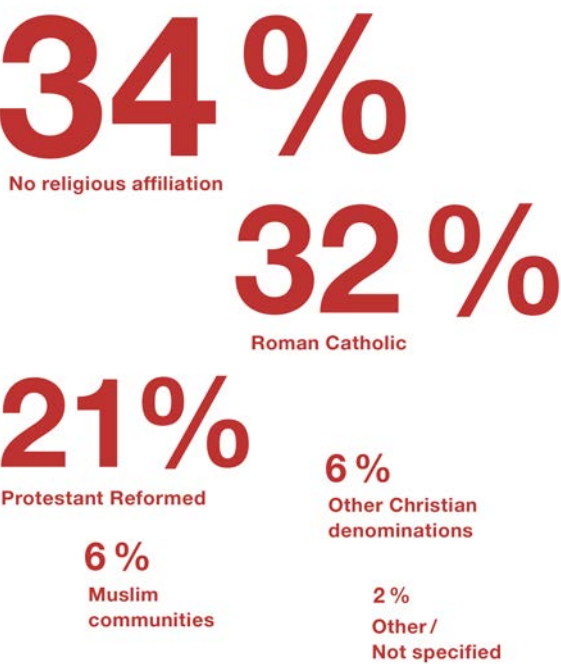
There are 8.9 million people living in Switzerland, 27 per cent of them without a Swiss passport (permanent resident population, Q3 2023). More than half of these foreign nationals were either born in Switzerland or have been living here for at least ten years. The majority of the foreign population comes from an EU country. The largest foreign national groups are from Italy, Germany and Portugal.



Swiss citizens 6.5 million
Non-Swiss citizens 2.4 million

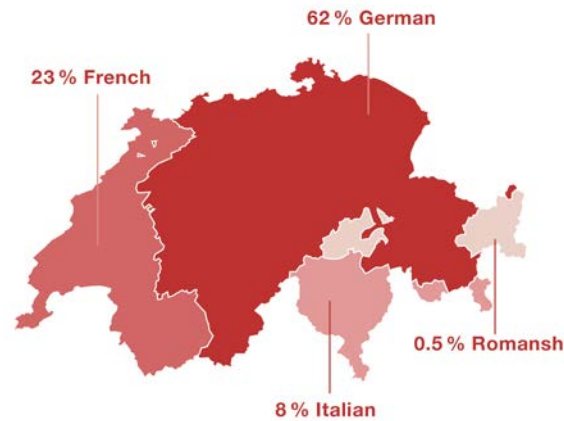
Christian majority

Switzerland is a predominantly Christian country: 59 % of the population is either Catholic or Protestant or belongs to another Christian community. Freedom of religion also allows other religious communities to exercise their faith. The number of people with no religious affiliation has been growing for quite some time – particularly among city dwellers.



4 national languages

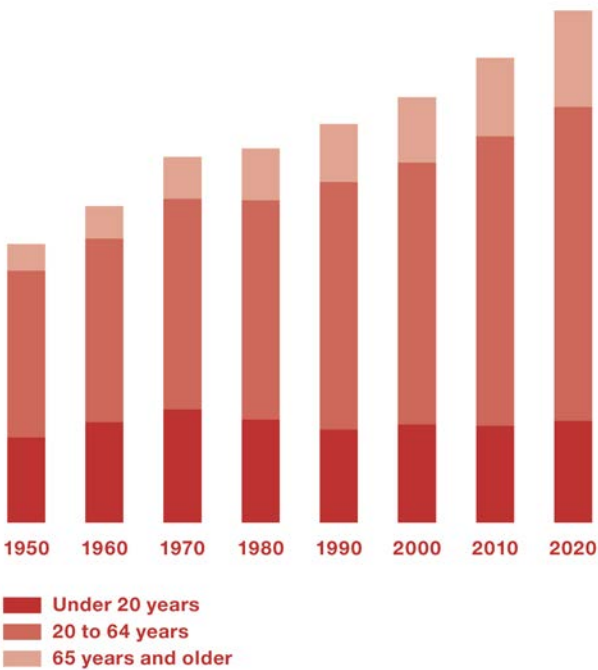
Switzerland is a multilingual country. The four national languages are German, French, Italian and Romansh. 62 per cent of the population primarily speak (Swiss-) German, 23 per cent French, 8 per cent Italian and 0.5 per cent Romansh. For 23 per cent of the population, their mother tongue is not one of Switzerland's national languages. Many people state that they have two main languages, i.e. they are bilingual.



Switzerland

High life expectancy

People in Switzerland are getting older and older and have fewer children than before. Average life expectancy is one of the highest in the world: it is 82 years for men and 85 years for women. Women have 1.4 children on average. The proportion of people over 64 years of age in the population has increased, while that of people under 20 years of age and 20 to 64 years of age has declined.



The history of Switzerland

Switzerland developed over the centuries from a collection of different alliances to a confederation of states and finally to the federal state we know today. **Its national borders and neutrality were established and recognised internationally in 1815. Its political system dates back to the Federal Constitution of 1848. Since then the powers of the federal government, political rights and political diversity have increased significantly.**



1847 – 1848
Sonderbund War
Liberals against conservatives

Diverging views on how the Confederation would be organised led to a civil war between liberal and Catholic conservative cantons. It was a war from which liberal forces emerged victorious.

1848
Federal Constitution
Democratic federal state

The Federal Constitution provided most citizens (men) with various rights and freedoms, including the right to vote and be elected. The bicameral system was introduced at federal level with the National Council and Council of States electing the Federal Council. Some powers were centralised. Switzerland developed into a unitary judicial and economic area.

1874, 1891
Expanded democracy
Initiative, referendum

The revised Federal Constitution transferred more tasks to the federal government and broadened democratic rights at federal level. The referendum was introduced in 1874 and the popular initiative in 1891. (→ p. 22)

1914 – 1918
First World War,
General strike
Socialist ideas

Poverty and unemployment during the First World War and socialist ideas from the Russian Revolution culminated in a general strike in 1918.



1291 Old Confederation Alliances

Shifting alliances between cities and outlying areas served to maintain internal political order and external independence. In 1291 the original forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden entered into the first documented alliance. In the following centuries, the Confederation continued to grow through alliances and territorial conquests.



1798–1802 Helvetic Republic Unitary state under foreign control

Following the French invasion in 1798, the Confederation was transformed into the Helvetic Republic: a unitary state ruled from Paris.



1803–1814 Mediation Loose foreign control

After civil wars broke out between federalists and supporters of the Helvetic Republic, Napoleon ordered a constitution based on the Act of Mediation, which restored some autonomy to the cantons and set most of the cantonal borders.



1815 Federal Treaty Neutrality and alliance of states

With the defeat of Napoleon, the great European powers recognised Swiss neutrality and set Switzerland's borders as they are today. The Federal Treaty of 1815 brought together the various federal alliances into a single confederation of states.



1919, 1929 Proportional representation Towards consensus democracy

In 1919, the National Council was elected on a proportional basis and a second Catholic Conservative (The Centre today) entered the Federal Council. A member of the Farmers', Trades' and Citizens' Party (SVP today) entered the Federal Council in 1929.



1939–1945 Second World War Inclusion of the left

Against the backdrop of the Second World War, the political forces from left to right moved closer together. In 1943 Parliament elected a Social Democrat into government, and in 1951 the left-wing party gained a second seat on the Federal Council. Since 1959, the Federal Council has comprised members from four political parties (→ 'magic formula' p. 51).



1971 Equal opportunities Women's franchise

In February 1971, 66% of the electorate, then exclusively male, voted in favour of the women's franchise at federal level. Most cantons and communes also gave women the vote following this decision.



2000 Third Federal Constitution Continuity and openness

The totally revised Federal Constitution regulated the division of tasks between the Confederation and the cantons. In 2000, Swiss voters approved the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the European Union. Two years later they voted in favour of joining the United Nations. (→ p. 14/15)

Federalism

Switzerland is a federal state: state power is shared between the federal government, the cantons and the communes. The cantons and communes have broad scope in carrying out their responsibilities. Federalism makes it possible for Switzerland to exist as one entity – in spite of four linguistic cultures and varying regional characteristics.

1

Switzerland, which is also referred to as the Swiss Confederation, has been a federal state since 1848.

26

The Confederation is made up of 26 cantons.



Confederation

The Federal Constitution defines the Confederation’s tasks and responsibilities. These include Switzerland’s relations with the outside world, defence, the national road network, and nuclear energy. Switzerland’s Parliament, the Federal Assembly, is made up of the National Council and the Council of States; the government comprises seven federal councillors, and the Federal Supreme Court is responsible for national jurisprudence. The Confederation is financed among other means through direct federal tax.

85 % of the domestic population lives in urban areas.

11 % of all Swiss citizens live outside Switzerland: 800 000 ‘Swiss Abroad’.

Cantons

Each canton has its own parliament, government, courts and constitution. The cantonal constitution may not contradict the Federal Constitution. The cantons implement the requirements of the Confederation, but structure their activities in accordance with their particular needs. They have broad scope in deciding how to meet their responsibilities, for example in the areas of education and health-care, cultural affairs and police matters. Each canton levies its own cantonal taxes.

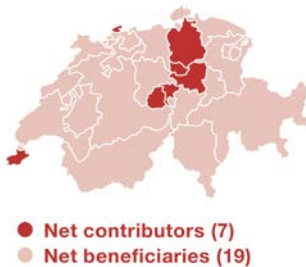
Four cantons are officially multilingual: Bern, Fribourg and Valais have two official languages, Graubünden even has three.

People’s assemblies (Lands-gemeinde) are still held in the cantons of Appenzell Inner-rhoden and Glarus.

The National Fiscal Equalisation system is an important instrument in ensuring Switzerland's cohesion and reflects its desire for solidarity. The economically stronger cantons and the federal government assist the financially weaker cantons.

When it comes to fulfilling their tasks, each canton starts with a different set of circumstances: there are smaller, larger, more urban, more rural and more mountainous cantons. The National Fiscal Equalisation system is designed to reduce the economic disparities between the cantons.

The federal government and 7 of the cantons are net contributors: ZG, SZ, NW, GE, BS, ZH, OW. The remaining 19 cantons receive equalisation payments (net beneficiaries).



In 2024, CHF 5.9bn flow into the fiscal equalisation system: 4bn from the federal government, 1.9bn from the cantons.



The examples of Valais and Zug
The Canton of Valais, which is financially weaker, receives CHF 884m in fiscal equalisation, or CHF 2506 per inhabitant.
The Canton of Zug, which is financially stronger, contributes CHF 383m, or CHF 2970 per inhabitant towards fiscal equalisation.



Fiscal equalisation

2131

The 26 cantons are divided into 2131 communes.



Communes

Each canton determines itself the division of responsibilities between it and the communes. The responsibilities of the communes include local planning, running schools, social welfare and the fire service. Larger communes and cities have their own parliaments, and organise their own referendums. In smaller communes, decisions are made by the citizens at communal assemblies. Each commune levies a communal tax.

The number of communes is gradually falling as more and more merge.

The most populous commune is the city of Zurich, where around 423,000 people live. The least populous is Kammerrohr in the canton of Solothurn (33 people).

Video on Federalism (in German)



International agreements and memberships

Europe



Agreements with the European Union EU

Switzerland is not a member of the EU, but has close relations with it. These are governed by over 100 bilateral agreements primarily concluded in two packages:

The first series of bilateral agreements was accepted by 67% of Swiss voters in 2000. The 7 agreements mainly cover economic matters. The main aim is to facilitate market access for both sides (goods, services, labour). The EU member states and especially the neighbouring countries are Switzerland's most important trading partners. Switzerland is the fourth most important trading partner for the EU.

The second series of bilateral agreements governs further economic aspects, as well as cooperation in the fields of asylum, security, the environment and culture. There are 9 agreements, including the Schengen-Dublin agreement, which was approved by 55 % of voters in 2005. Schengen facilitates transnational mobility and cooperation on justice and police. Dublin facilitates coordination on asylum proceedings.

27 member states
Headquarters in Brussels
Since 1951 (ECSC)

International Geneva

Over 40 international organisations and several hundred non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are based in Geneva. Countless international conferences and meetings are held there every year with around 366,000 delegates arriving from all over the world.

Memberships

EFTA

The European Free Trade Association promotes free trade between its members Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Iceland and Norway. Together with the EU countries, the EFTA countries – excluding Switzerland – form the European Economic Area (EEA). Swiss voters rejected membership of the EEA in 1992.

4 member states
Headquarters in Geneva
Founded in 1960, Switzerland a founding member

Council of Europe

The Council of Europe focuses its work on promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is one of the Council of Europe's major achievements. It gives every citizen the right to lodge a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights if rights guaranteed by the ECHR have been violated – provided that all judicial avenues in Switzerland have been exhausted.

46 member states
Headquarters in Strasbourg
Founded in 1949, Switzerland a member since 1963

Neutrality

Switzerland is a neutral state: it may not take part in armed conflicts between two states or enter into military alliances. Switzerland's neutrality is recognised worldwide, which is why it is often asked to mediate in conflicts or exercise protective power mandates.



Neutrality

Switzerland is a neutral country with worldwide connections: it has ties with the European Union through a network of bilateral agreements, and it is a member of the United Nations and other international organisations. Experts and politicians from around the world meet in Geneva to work together internationally.



Memberships

UN

194 states of the world belong to the United Nations. It is committed to promoting peace and international security, worldwide cooperation in solving international problems and respect for human rights. Switzerland has been a member of the UN since 2002: In a referendum, accession was accepted by 55 % of Swiss voters. Switzerland is member of the UN Security Council in 2023/2024.

194 member states
Main headquarters in New York, European headquarters in Geneva and Vienna
Founded in 1945, Switzerland a member since 2002

OSCE

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, with its participating states in North America, Europe and Asia, is the world's largest regional security organisation. As a political forum for dialogue, it addresses a broad range of regional security issues encompassing politico-military matters, economic and environmental issues and human rights.

57 participating states
Headquarters in Vienna
Founded in 1975, Switzerland a founding member

UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, also active in the field of communication, is a forum for international cooperation and the development of global standards. Its aim is to promote solidarity among people and thereby contribute to peace, security and sustainable development.

194 member states
Headquarters in Paris
Founded in 1945, Switzerland a member since 1949

WTO

The World Trade Organization regulates and promotes global trade relations. The aim of the WTO agreements is to ensure transparent, functioning and non-discriminatory trade. WTO members undertake to comply with certain basic rules in shaping their trade relations.

164 member states
Headquarters in Geneva
Founded in 1995, Switzerland a founding member

OECD

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development is a forum for exchanging knowledge in a wide variety of fields. Its goal is to promote prosperity, quality of life and equal opportunities. The OECD develops international standards and regularly publishes international statistics and studies, including the PISA studies.

38 member states
Headquarters in Paris
Founded in 1961, Switzerland a founding member

Partnerships

NATO Partnership for Peace

Switzerland is not a member of NATO, but cooperates with it within the framework of the Partnership for Peace and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. NATO is a political and military defence alliance of 30 European and North American countries. Together with partner countries, it works for security and peace.

31 members
Headquarters in Brussels
Founded in 1949

Direct democracy

Sion, 22. October 2023, Election to the Council of States in the canton of Valais: More than 50 election helpers sort and check ballot papers. Once counting has been completed, it becomes

clear which candidates have received the most votes. As no single candidate achieved an absolute majority, a second ballot has to be held in November.





Direct democracy

Is there any other country where people have as many democratic rights as in Switzerland? People vote on specific issues three to four times a year. Every four years there are parliamentary elections. The separation of powers ensures that power is not concentrated in the hands of any single person or political party: this is a fundamental principle of Swiss democracy.

Turnout for votes and elections

Usually around 48 % of those eligible to vote cast their ballots in federal votes. Voter turnout may be higher or lower depending on the issue that is being voted on. Turnout is similar in elections: just under 50 % of Swiss women and men normally vote in federal elections.

Casting your ballot

Voters have various ways of casting their ballots:

- **By post:** voters send their ballot paper by post in the official envelope or pop it in the mail box at their local council offices.
- **At the ballot box:** voters can put their ballot paper in the ballot box at the local polling station.

E-voting

The federal government enables the cantons to offer online electronic voting to a section of their voters. These trials have to meet rigorous requirements. The federal government and the cantons are supported in this by the scientific community.

People's assemblies (Landsgemeinden)

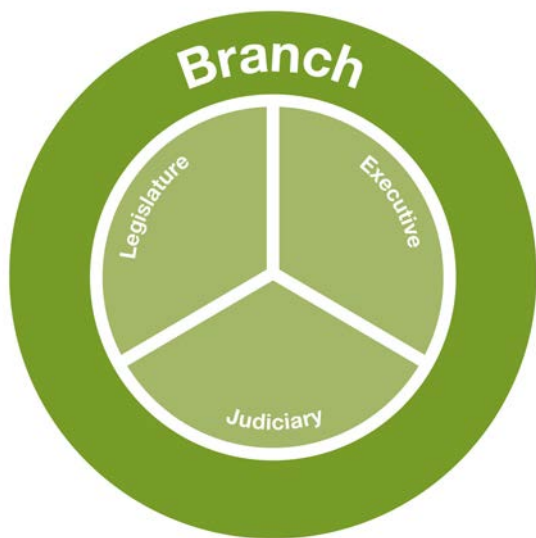
In the cantons of Glarus and Appenzell Innerrhoden, several thousand voters gather outdoors once a year to vote in a people's assembly (Landsgemeinde). They vote to elect their representatives and to decide on proposals that affect their canton. The people's assembly is an ancient form of Swiss democracy.



Political system

Separation of powers

Power is divided among the three branches of the State, the legislature (Parliament), the executive (Federal Council) and the judiciary (courts).



Right to vote and to be elected

Swiss citizens aged 18 and over have the right to vote and they can stand as candidates for public office. Around 5.5 million people are eligible to vote.



Popular votes

The Swiss are world champions at voting: they vote on every amendment to the Constitution. By launching a popular initiative or calling for a referendum, citizens can demand that a vote be held on a political issue.



A wide range of parties

Switzerland's political landscape is home to a diverse range of parties, none of which has a majority at federal level – neither in Parliament nor in the Federal Council.



Separation of powers

The separation of powers prevents a concentration of power in the hands of any individual person or institution. It is a basic principle of democracy: power is divided among the three branches of state, the legislature, executive and judiciary. No one may serve more than one of the three branches of state at any given time.

The Sovereign
The Swiss people



The Swiss people elect the Parliament (the legislature):
The 200 members of the National Council and the 46 members of the Council of States.





The Executive The Government

FDJP

DETEC

DDPS

FDFA

FDHA

PDF

EAER

Implementing laws

The Federal Council is Switzerland's government: it draws up new laws and ensures that the decisions of Parliament are implemented. It comprises seven equal members; they reach their decisions together. Each Federal Councillor heads a department. The seven departments and the Federal Chancellery make up the Federal Administration. (→ p. 48ff.)



Parliament elects the government (the executive):
The seven members of the Federal Council and the Federal Chancellor.



National Council

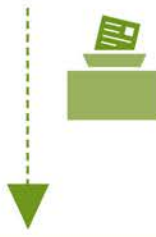


Council of States

The Legislature Parliament

Passing laws

Parliament decides on new laws and oversees the Federal Council and the Federal Administration as well as the federal courts and the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland. It comprises two chambers: The National Council represents the People, while the Council of States represents the 26 cantons. The two Councils have equal powers. Together they make up the United Federal Assembly. (→ p. 30ff.)



Parliament appoints the judges (the judiciary):
The president of the Federal Supreme Court and the judges of the four federal courts.



The Judiciary The Courts

Laying down the law

There are four federal courts. The highest court is the Federal Supreme Court: it hears appeals against the judgments of the other courts and issues the final judgment in most cases. The Federal Criminal Court, the Federal Administrative Court and the Federal Patent Court are the federal courts of first instance. Most of their decisions can be appealed to the Federal Supreme Court. (→ p. 74ff.)

Parliament also appoints the Attorney General: he or she heads the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland, which prosecutes offences involving explosives and espionage as well as offences committed by federal employees while carrying out their official duties.
www.attorneygeneral.ch

Elections

Elections to the Federal Assembly are held every four years. Voters aim to elect the 246 members of parliament that best represent their views. They have a large number of candidates from a wide range of parties from which to choose.

Elections to the National Council

Elections to the National Council are federal elections. The provisions of the Federal Act on Political Rights apply in all cantons.

Right to vote and to be elected

Swiss citizens over the age of 18 are eligible to vote: not only can they vote for the members of the National Council (right to vote), they can also stand for election to the National Council (right to be elected).

Elections based on proportional representation

Elections to the National Council in most cantons are based on a system of proportional representation: seats are allocated in proportion to the number of votes each party or party list receives.

Dates

The most recent federal elections were held on 22 October 2023. The next elections to the National Council and (in most cantons) the Council of States will be held on **24 October 2027**.

Elections to the Council of States

Elections to the Council of States are governed by cantonal law: each canton has its own rules on who is eligible to vote, when elections are held, what the election procedure is and how ballot papers are completed. However, the following rules are the same in all 26 cantons: elections to the Council of States are held every four years and candidates for election to the Council of States must be at least 18 years old and hold Swiss citizenship.

Elections based on the simple majority system

Elections to the Council of States in almost every canton are based on the simple majority system: the person who receives the most votes is elected.

- **Absolute majority:** the person who receives more than half of all the votes cast is elected.
- **Relative majority:** the person who receives more votes than any of the other candidates is elected.

Examples of cantonal differences

In the canton of Glarus, Swiss citizens aged 16 and 17 can also vote in elections to the Council of States. Candidates for the Council of States must be under the age of 65. In Appenzell Innerrhoden, voters elect their member of the Council of States at an outdoor assembly ('the Landsgemeinde'). In the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel, a system of proportional representation is used, while in the other cantons the simple majority system applies.



Electoral vocabulary



Voting rights (with video)



Official information on the federal elections 2023



Infographics of the Federal Statistical Office

Elections are decisive

Even in Switzerland most issues are decided by Parliament or the government. However, between the elections in 2019 and 2023, the electorate was called on to vote on 36 specific proposals. In the same period, Parliament passed 515 laws, including 187 federal acts and 83 federal decrees. It also elected the government, the members of the federal courts and the Attorney General.

Parties from left to right

In the elections to the Swiss parliament, there are quite a number of parties to choose from, some very different from others. They differ from each other in their views on the role of the state, society and the economy.

Whereas left-wing parties (SP, the Greens) favour a highly developed social state, right-of-centre parties (FDP, SVP) advocate a liberal economic policy and personal responsibility. Certain political issues are neither distinctly left nor right-wing, i.e. environmental protection, the question of how open Switzerland should be towards the EU and international organisations, and issues regarding liberal values (e.g. same-sex partnerships). Depending on the issue, centre parties (The Centre) will cooperate with either left or right-wing parties.

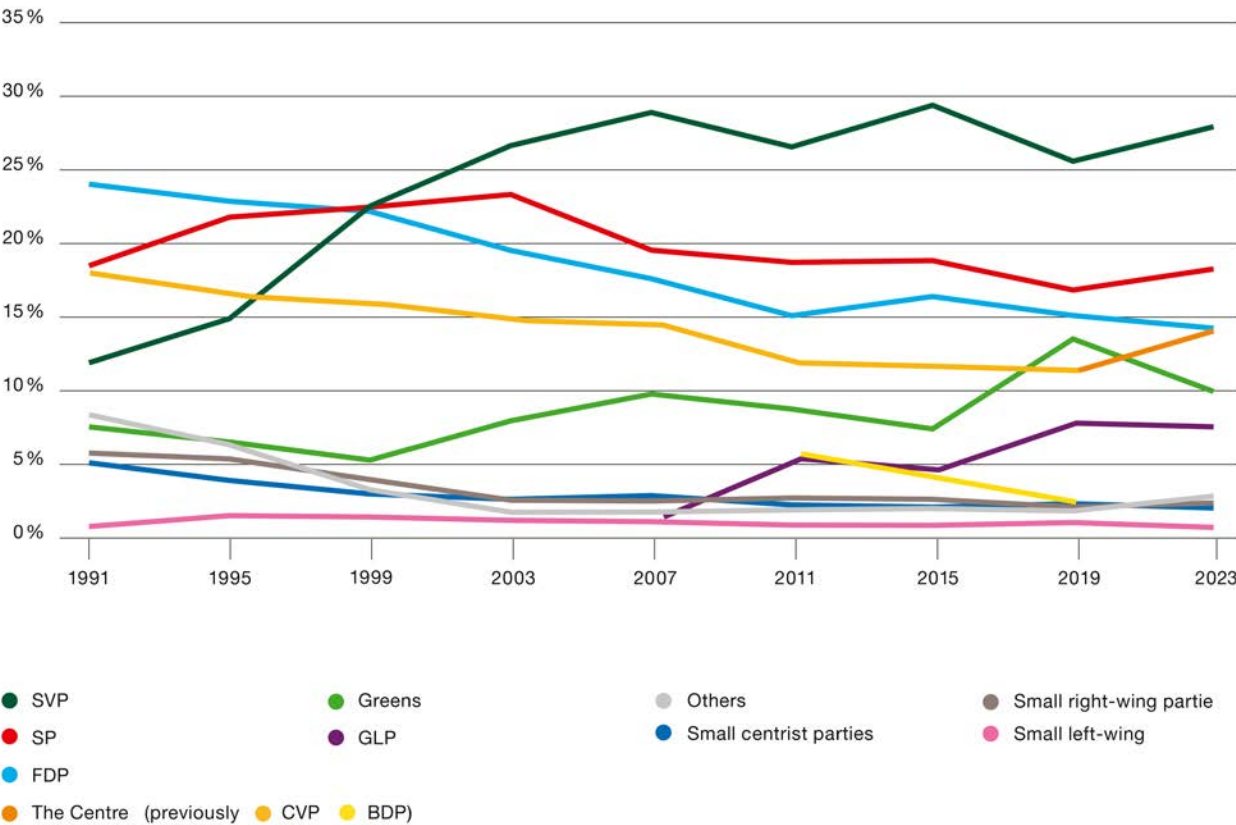
What does ‘left-wing’ mean?

A strong social state that levels social disparities
Emphasis on workers’ interests
Price controls, public services
More peace policy, less military

What does ‘right-wing’ mean?

Freedom and personal responsibility; the state intervenes only where absolutely necessary
Emphasis on employers’ interests
Free enterprise, economic incentives
Strong national defence

Party strengths (shares of the vote in elections to the National Council 2023)



Political parties in the Federal Council and in Parliament

Switzerland’s political landscape comprises many different parties, of which none holds a majority at federal level: There is no majority or opposition party in the country. In the 2023–2027 legislature period, 10 political parties are represented in the National Council. 7 of those are also represented in the Council of States, 4 in the Federal Council.

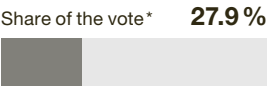
Political parties help to form political opinion, nominate candidates for public office and launch initiatives and referendums. Parties differ from each another in their views on the role of the state, society and the economy.



SVP – Swiss People’s Party



Party President
vacant
(Election in spring 2024)

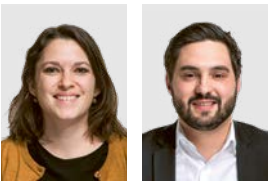


Federal Council	2
National Council	62
Council of States	6

www.svp.ch



SP – Swiss Social Democratic Party



Co-Presidents
Mattea Meyer
Cédric Wermuth



Federal Council	2
National Council	41
Council of States	9

www.sp-ps.ch



FDP – FDP.The Liberals



Party President
Thierry Burkart



Federal Council	2
National Council	28
Council of States	11

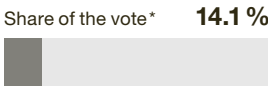
www.fdp.ch



The Centre**



Party President
Gerhard Pfister



Federal Council	1
National Council	29
Council of States	15

www.die-mitte.ch

* Share of the vote at the 2023 parliamentary elections ('party strength') → p. 25

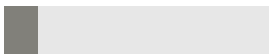


The GREENS
Switzerland



Party President
vacant
(Election in spring 2024)

Share of the vote* **9.8%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	23
Council of States	3

www.gruene.ch

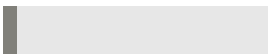


glp – Swiss Green
Liberal Party



Party President
Jürg Grossen

Share of the vote* **7.6%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	10
Council of States	1

www.gruenliberale.ch

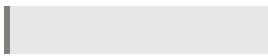


EVP – Swiss Evangeli-
cal People's Party



Party President
Lilian Studer

Share of the vote* **2%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	2
Council of States	0

www.evppev.ch

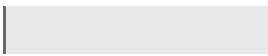


EDU – Federal
Democratic Union



Party President
Daniel Frischknecht

Share of the vote* **1.2%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	2
Council of States	0

www.edu-schweiz.ch



LdT –
Lega dei Ticinesi



Coordinator
Norman Gobbi

Share of the vote* **0.6%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	1
Council of States	0

www.lega-dei-ticinesi.ch



MCG –
Mouvement Citoyens
Genevois



Party President
François Baertschi

Share of the vote* **0.5%**



Federal Council	0
National Council	2
Council of States	1

www.mcge.ch

Parties with similar political convictions come together in parliamentary groups (→ p. 36).

Party presidents are not elected by the electorate, but by the members of the respective parties.



Political parties
in Switzerland

The Legislature **Parliament**

4 December 2023: The newly elected and re-elected members of the National Council meet for the first time. They swear to uphold the Constitution and the law and fulfil their duties

of office conscientiously. Some swear the oath by raising their hand, others make a solemn promise. Anyone who refuses to take the oath or make the solemn promise is prohibited from assuming office.





The Legislature Parliament

Parliament passes laws and elects the members of the federal government and the federal courts. It is responsible for the federal budget and exercises oversight over the Federal Administration.

Parliament is elected by the People. It consists of two chambers: the National Council and the Council of States. The National Council represents the people of Switzerland; the Council of States represents the 26 cantons. Each chamber has the same powers, and they conduct the same business. When sitting together in joint session, they constitute the United Federal Assembly.

www.parliament.ch



[Video about Parliament – ‘Erklär mir das Parlament’ \(in German\)](#)

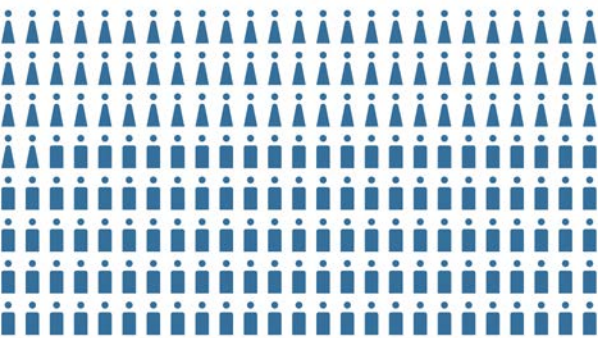
The home of Swiss political life

The seat of Switzerland's parliament is the Parliament Building in Bern. It was built between 1894 and 1902 according to plans drawn up by Hans Wilhelm Auer, and was inaugurated by the United Federal Assembly on 1 April 1902.

The architect had the aim of creating a national monument. 95% of the materials used were sourced within Switzerland; contracts were awarded to 173 Swiss firms, while 38 Swiss artists were able to leave their mark in the Parliament Building for posterity. Naturally, Auer was careful to ensure that all of the cantons were represented when awarding the contracts.

The whole building is a reminder that Switzerland is a nation founded on the will of its people, in which different cultures, different linguistic areas and different geographical regions have come together of their own free will to form a political, national entity.

Members in the National Council and the Council of States

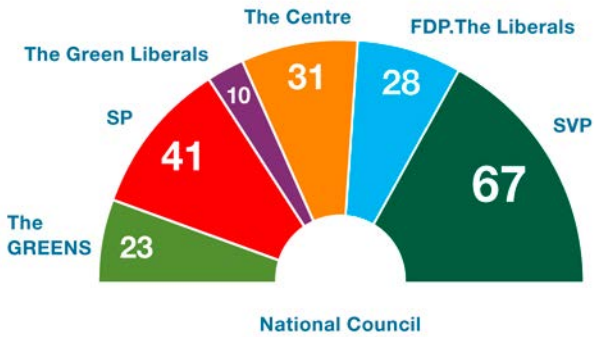


200 members of the National Council



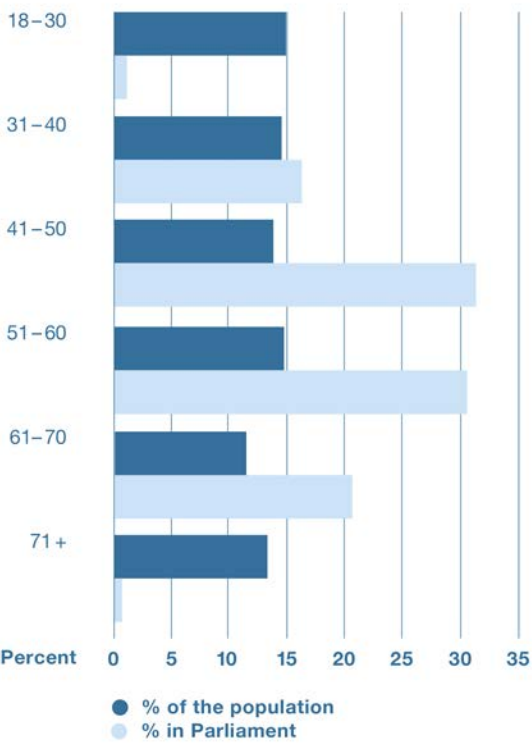
46 members of the Council of States

Strength of parliamentary groups

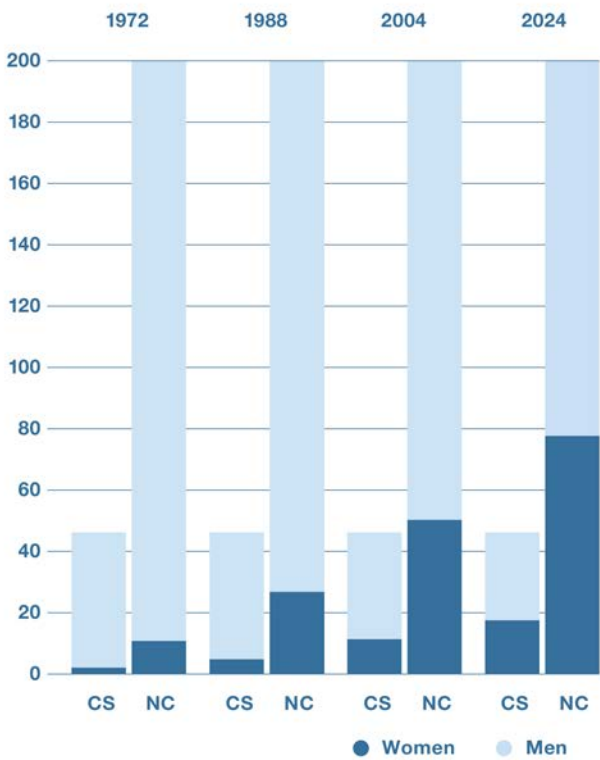


All graphics: Status 12. 01. 2024

Age groups in the Swiss population and in Parliament



Women and men in Parliament



The roles of Parliament

Parliament is responsible for enacting legislation, releasing funding, electing the members of the highest federal authorities and overseeing the Federal Council, the Federal Administration and the federal courts.



Legislation

Parliament enacts legislative provisions in the form of federal acts or ordinances. Amendments to the Federal Constitution must be put to the vote of the People and the Cantons.

The Federal Constitution

forms the bedrock of the Swiss Confederation. The People and the Cantons are the gatekeepers of the Constitution. Parliament can draft amendments to the Federal Constitution, but must put them to the vote of the People and the Cantons (→ mandatory referendum, p. 22). People can launch a popular initiative to amend the Constitution (→ p. 22).

Federal acts

formulate in detail the provisions of the Constitution. They are enacted by Parliament, but are subject to an optional referendum (→ p. 22): If 50,000 eligible voters or eight cantons request a referendum, the act is submitted to the People for a vote. A majority of voters must approve the act for it to come into force.

How new laws come about
→ p. 42/43

Ordinances

complement the acts. The Federal Council and the departments enact most of the ordinances, which are issued without the participation of Parliament. In the case of an important ordinance, the relevant parliamentary committee may request that a draft text be submitted for consultation. Ordinances are not subject to referendums.



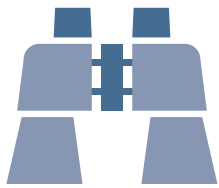
Election of federal authorities

The National Council and the Council of States come together for elections to form the United Federal Assembly, which elects the members of the federal government and the federal courts and, in the event of war, appoints a general. During the winter session, it elects one member of the Federal Council as president of the federal government, and another as vice president, each for a one-year mandate. The United Federal Assembly also elects the Federal Council's chief of staff, also known as the Federal Chancellor, the Attorney General of Switzerland and the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner.

Federal Council → p. 50/51

Federal Courts → p. 74–81

The technical term for the Swiss parliament is 'Federal Assembly'. Article 148 of the Federal Constitution reads, for example: "Subject to the rights of the People and Cantons, the Federal Assembly is the supreme authority of the Confederation."



Budget control and oversight

Parliament has sovereignty over federal finances: it determines the budget for the following year, takes note of the Federal Council's budget and approves the state accounts of the previous year. Parliament votes on the budget during the winter session. The items of business move quickly from one chamber to the other. In the event that the National Council and the Council of States are unable to reach an agreement on the federal budget, the lower amount is accepted. The finance and control committees and their delegations are in charge of overseeing the Federal Budget. They check the work of the Federal Council, the Federal Administration and the federal courts, and thereby also examine the effectiveness of these authorities.

Federal revenues and expenses: p. 48/49

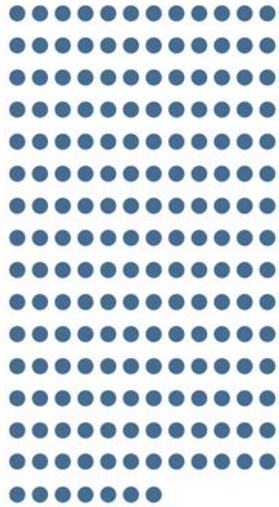


Video about the roles of the Federal Assembly (in German)

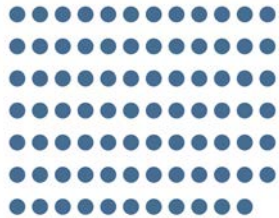
Legislative provisions are enacted in the form of federal acts and ordinances. The other form of enactment is the federal decree. Referendums are required only for a small number of federal acts. Simple federal decrees and ordinances cannot be stopped by a referendum.

In the 51st legislature period (2019–2023) Parliament enacted 515 decrees:

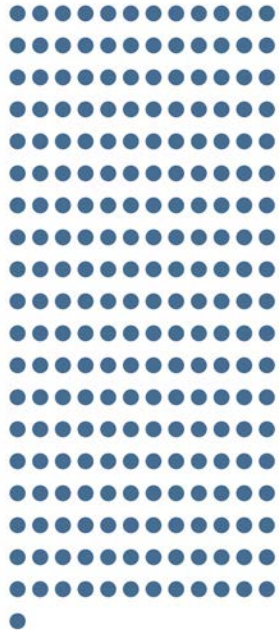
187 federal acts



83 federal decrees



229 simple federal decrees



16 ordinances



Organisation of Parliament

The Swiss parliament consists of two chambers: the National Council and the Council of States. The National Council represents the Swiss population, while the Council of States represents the 26 cantons. The two Councils have equal powers: All items of business are handled both by the National Council and the Council of States. The Councils must agree on all items of business before their decisions can come into force.



The large chamber is the National Council

The National Council represents the people living in Switzerland. It has 200 seats. Cantons with a larger population have more seats. Each canton is entitled to at least one seat. Each member of the National Council represents around 45,000 people. The National Council is also known as the ‘large chamber’ or the ‘people’s chamber’.

President of the National Council for 2024

Every year, a different member acts as president of the National Council. Eric Nussbaumer (SP) will preside over the National Council in 2024. The president plans and directs National Council deliberations, heads the Council Office and represents the National Council externally.

Election based on proportional representation

National Council elections are held every four years in most cantons on a proportional basis. This means that the seats held by a canton are distributed among the different political parties based on the votes they receive. This makes it possible for smaller political forces to be represented in the people’s chamber.

National Council elections schedule

The next elections will be held on
24 October 2027.



Video about the most important bodies of the Federal Assembly (in German)



The small chamber is the Council of States

The Council of States has 46 seats and represents the cantons. Twenty cantons have two seats, and six cantons have one seat. The six cantons with only one seat were until 1999 listed as ‘half cantons’ in the Federal Constitution. They are Obwalden and Nidwalden, Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Appenzell Innerrhoden, and Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft. The size of a canton’s population is not a determining factor in its number of seats in the Council of States. The canton of Uri, which has a comparatively small population, has the same number of two seats as does the populous canton of Zurich. This system balances out the voting power of the populous cantons in the National Council. The Council of States is often referred to as the ‘small chamber’ or the ‘chamber of the cantons’.

President of the Council of States for 2024

Every year a different member acts as president of the Council of States. Eva Herzog (SP) will preside over the Council of States in 2024. The president plans and directs the Council of States deliberations, heads the Council Office and represents the Council of States externally.

Election based on the simple majority system

Council of States elections are held every four years, in most cantons at the same time as the National Council elections. Council of States elections are almost always based on the simple majority system. This means that the candidate who receives the most votes is elected. The cantons decide individually when and how they elect their representatives to the Council of States.

Council of States elections schedule

The next elections will be held in **April or October 2027.**



The United Federal Assembly

The National Council and the Council of States convene as the United Federal Assembly to handle specific items of business. The United Federal Assembly elects the members of the federal government and the Federal Supreme Court, the Federal Chancellor, and the Attorney General of Switzerland. It also meets to take note of statements made by the Federal Council, and rule on conflicts of jurisdiction.

Sessions

The National Council and the Council of States meet for three-week sessions in spring, summer, autumn and winter to deliberate and rule on items of business. The two chambers meet separately, but under the same roof of the Parliament Building in Bern. Council Office, parliamentary group and committee meetings take place in-between sessions.

Schedule of sessions for 2024

Spring session:
26 February – 15 March
Summer session:
27 May – 14 June
Autumn session:
9 – 27 September
Winter session:
2 – 20 December

Special session (if required):
15 – 19 April

Election of the presidents of the National Council and of the Council of States:
2 December

Election of the President of the Swiss Confederation and of the Vice President of the Federal Council: **11 December**

The meetings are open to the public. The debates are broadcast live on the Parliament website, and published after around an hour as a verbatim report with a video in the Official Bulletin:
www.parliament.ch



President of the National Council for 2024
Eric Nussbaumer,
Basel-Landschaft
Social Democratic Party

What priority have you set for your year as president?

The motto of my presidential year is 'Transcending boundaries – broadening horizons'. Good politics thrives on listening to people who do not share the same opinion. Our views and experiences should not end at our own garden fence. What is unfamiliar to me should broaden my horizons!

What inspired you to enter politics?

I have always been interested in politics because it is through politics that we negotiate and shape the way in which we live side-by-side in peace and prosperity. So politics also has a lot to do with who I am. I ended up in parliamentary politics because I relish the lively debates.



President of the Council of States for 2024
Eva Herzog, Basel-Stadt
Social Democratic Party

What priorities have you set for your year as president?

I would like to highlight urban Switzerland and its potential for social, economic, political and cultural innovation. More than three quarters of the population live in our cities and urban centres, and four out of five jobs are located there. I will also be focusing on equality.

How do you see Switzerland in 20 years?

Together with the EU, Switzerland is closely involved in shaping the future of our continent – with everything that makes us strong: direct democracy, federalism, the welfare state and humanitarian services. Thanks to our excellent universities and strong economy, we remain a world leader in innovation. The transition to renewable, domestic energies has been a success.

Political parties and parliamentary groups

10 parties are represented in Parliament, none of which holds a majority (→ p. 26).

Parliament is divided politically into **6 parliamentary groups**. They are made up of council members from the same party or from parties with similar views. Even members of small cantonal parties or independents tend to join a parliamentary group. At least five members are needed to form a parliamentary group.

The parliamentary groups are important for the formation of political opinion. They discuss important items of business of the Councils with the aim of agreeing on a common position which can be supported by the council members in the chamber and before the media and the general public.

In the National Council, membership of a parliamentary group is particularly important, since it is a prerequisite for being granted a seat on a committee. The more members a parliamentary group has, the more seats they are entitled to on committees and the greater the influence they have in Parliament. In the Council of States, parliamentary groups play a less important role.

Debates in the Councils

Despite the fact that the two Councils have the same rights, there are clear differences – not least because of their difference in size. In the National Council, debates are more rigorously regulated, and speaking time is restricted. Members of the National Council wishing to express an opinion must step up to the lectern to do so, while members of the Council of States may speak from their seats and are not subjected to speaking restrictions. During Council of States debates, anyone may take the floor. This leaves more room for spontaneity.

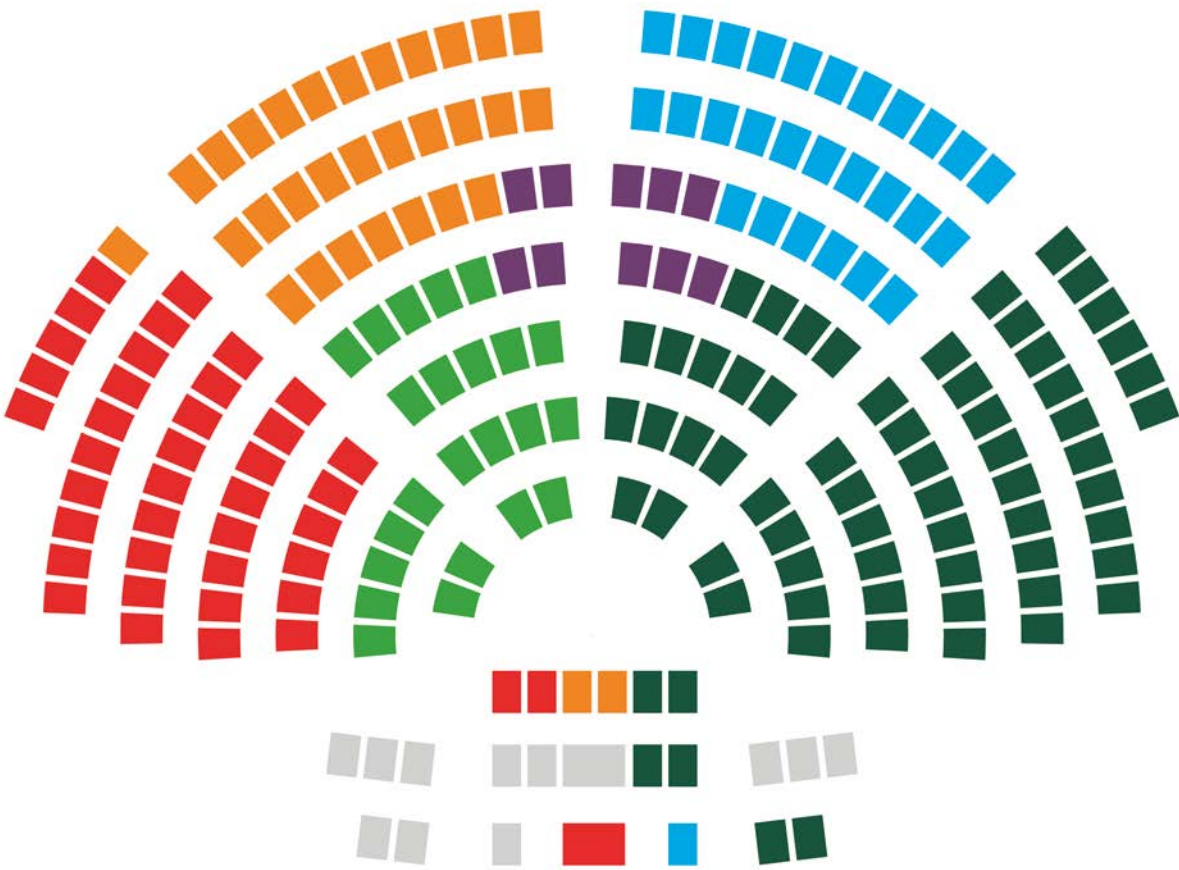


National Council chamber

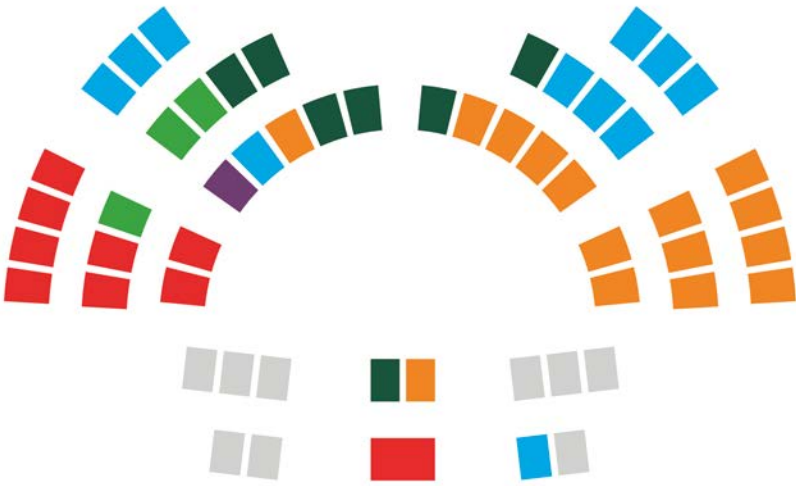


Council of States chamber

Parliamentary group (Status 12.01.2024)	President	Composition/party	Total	NC	CS
● Group of the Swiss People's Party	Thomas Aeschi	68 SVP, 1 Lega, 2 EDU, 3 MCG	74	67	7
● Social Democratic Group	Samuel Bendaham Samira Marti	50 SP	50	41	9
● Centre group (The Centre-EVP)	Philipp Matthias Bregy	44 The Centre, 2 EVP	46	31	15
● FDP.The Liberals Group	Damien Cottier	39 FDP.The Liberals	39	28	11
● Green Group	Aline Trede	26 The GREENS	26	23	3
● Green Liberal Group	Corina Gredig	11 GLP	11	10	1



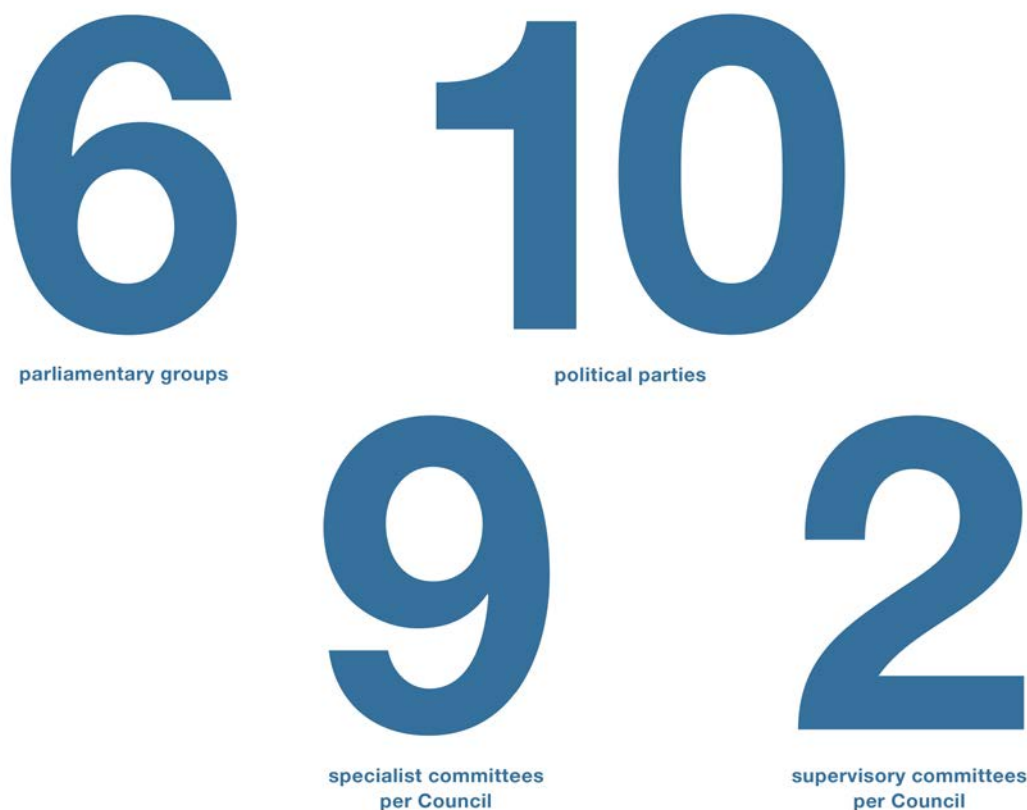
Allocation of seats in the Council of States



- SVP
- SP
- The Centre
- FDP.The Liberals
- The GREENS
- GLP

Current seating plans:
Who sits where?
(in German)





Committees and delegations

The full Parliament is made up of 246 members. It would be difficult for so many people to deliberate an item of business. This is why initial discussions on all items of business take place in committees, which hold their meetings in camera. National Council committees comprise 25 members each, while those in the Council of States comprise 13 members. There are different types of committees:

Specialist committees

The National Council and the Council of States have nine committees that deal with specific areas. They discuss items of business related to their specific area and stay up-to-date on any relevant social and political developments.

Specific areas:

- Legal affairs
- Security policy
- State policy
- Economy and taxes
- Social security and healthcare
- Science, education and culture
- Transport and telecommunications
- Environment, spatial planning and energy
- Foreign policy

Supervisory committees

Each chamber has two supervisory committees: one to oversee federal finances and the other to examine the business of other federal authorities (Finance Committees and Control Committees).

The most rigorous means of parliamentary oversight is the Parliamentary Investigation Committee (PlnC).

Delegations

Delegations are composed of members of both chambers. Three delegations perform supervisory functions; seven delegations represent the Swiss parliament in international parliamentary assemblies; and five additional delegations are in charge of fostering relations with foreign parliaments.

Video
'Committee room 287 – Where policymaking happens. A Swiss Parliament film'



Parliamentary instruments

Members of the Federal Assembly, parliamentary groups and committees can initiate measures, propose new legislation and request information or reports. These procedural requests are generally addressed to the Federal Council.

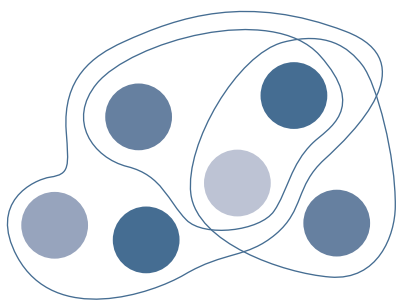
- Members of the Federal Assembly, parliamentary groups and committees can table a **parliamentary initiative** to propose draft legislation. If both Councils agree, a committee will draw up the draft legislation.
- A **motion** is used to instruct the Federal Council to draft legislation (an act or an ordinance) or to take a specific measure. A motion must be approved by both Councils.
- A **postulate** is used to instruct the Federal Council to examine and report whether a new law should be drafted or measures taken. A postulate is accepted if a Council agrees to it.

Before a motion or a postulate is submitted to the Council, the Federal Council puts forward a recommendation. The procedural requests recommended for adoption are expedited. The recommendation is prepared by the relevant department.

- An **interpellation** is a request to the Federal Council for information on important incidents in Switzerland and abroad, and on federal government matters. The Federal Council's response is then sometimes discussed in the Council of States and, in the case of urgent interpellations, also in the National Council.
- **Questions** are used to request information from the Federal Council. The Federal Council answers questions in writing. They are not dealt with in the Council. Urgent questions must be answered by the Federal Council in the same session.
- During **question time in the National Council**, Council members can ask the Federal Council questions on current issues. The questions must be submitted in writing one week in advance and will be answered orally by the responsible head of department.



Particularities of Parliament



Shifting majorities

Several parties are represented in Parliament, none of which holds a majority. Parliament does not have a lasting majority nor a permanent opposition, as is the case in many other countries. Majorities are built on the basis of the issues and depend on which parties agree on an issue.



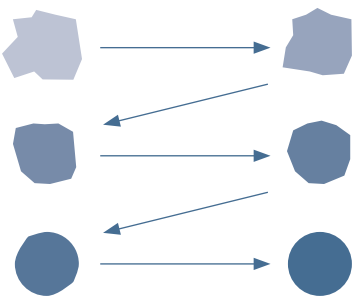
Two councils with equal powers

In many countries, parliament is unicameral. In Switzerland, Parliament has two chambers – the National Council and the Council of States – which have exactly the same powers and responsibilities. The two chambers deal with the same business in the same way. They must agree on all points for a bill to come into force, and must use the same wording to adopt legislation. Approval by only one chamber is not enough. It often takes time for the National Council and the Council of States to reach an agreement.



Semi-professional Parliament

Most of the members of the Swiss parliament are not full-time politicians. Part-time politicians bring hands-on expertise to debates due to their professional experience, and they are more grounded and accessible to the people. However, council members spend more and more time on their parliamentary work, some even full-time. This gives Switzerland a mixture of part-time and full-time politicians.



Resolution of differences

In the event that the National Council and the Council of States are unable to reach an agreement on an item of business, the business is sent from one chamber to the other for a resolution of differences, where it is examined by the preliminary consultation committees. If the National Council and the Council of States are still not in agreement about the business after three rounds, a reconciliation conference is held. If there is no agreement on the business, it is abandoned. (→ p. 43)

Guten Tag! Bonjour! Buon giorno!

Three official languages

Parliament debates and enacts laws in the country's three official languages (German, French, Italian), and in certain cases also in Romansh. In the National Council, statements are translated simultaneously into the three official languages. Multilingualism reflects the respect for minorities, which is the basis for living together in Switzerland. Every statement is published in the language in which it was submitted in the Official Bulletin.



Voting recommendations

Popular votes are held regularly in Switzerland. Parliament and the Federal Council provide voting recommendations on each proposal in an explanatory pamphlet that is sent to all voters before the vote. The pamphlet is also available online.



Stability

The government and Parliament are elected for a period of four years, and cannot be dissolved. Parliament's decisions are not an expression of confidence or no confidence in the government. Parliament can send back, amend or reject draft legislation, without the government having to step down. This gives Parliament a strong position. In addition, Parliament is the only body at national level that is directly legitimised by the People.



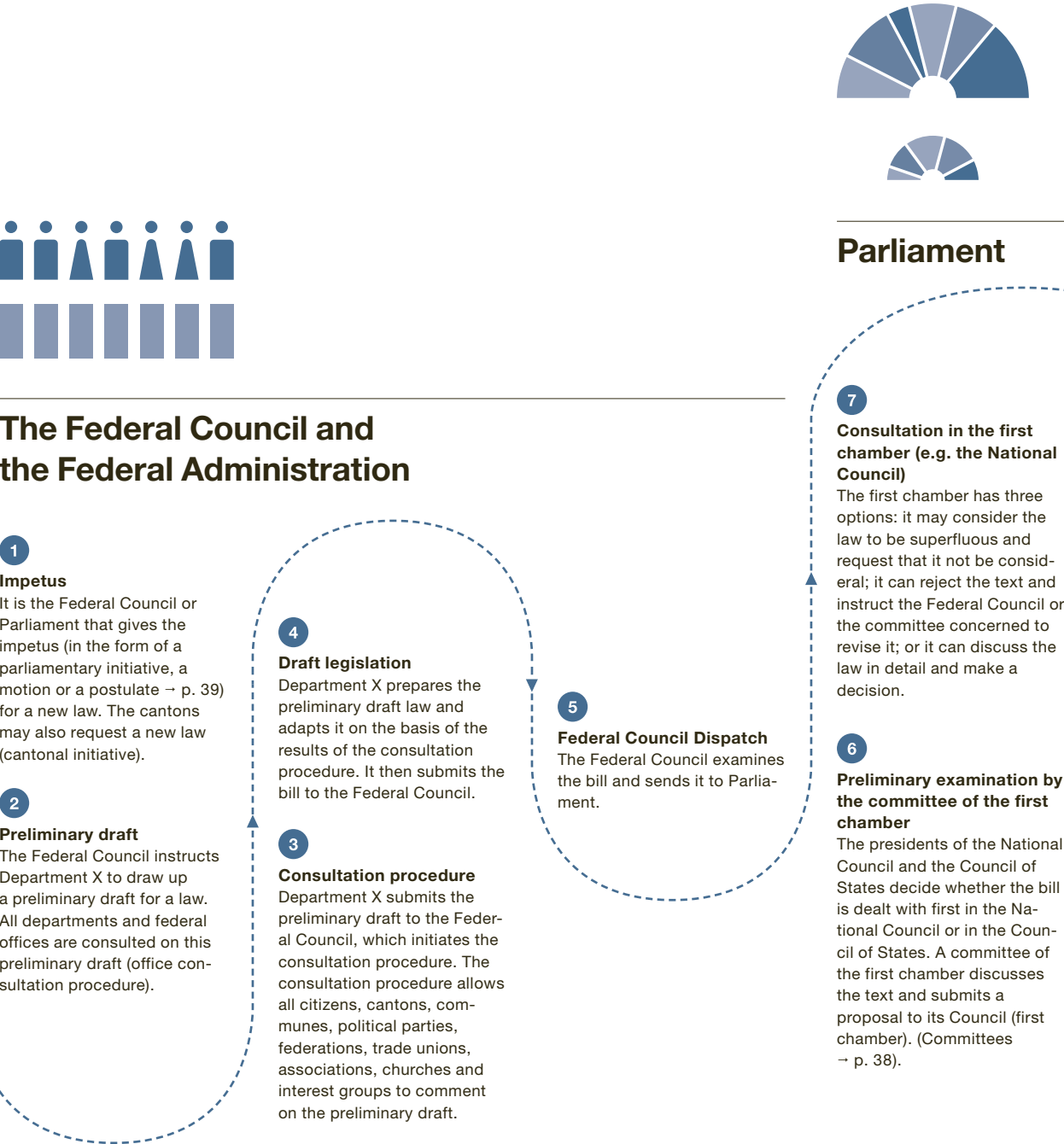
The People have the last word

In Switzerland, it is not Parliament that has the last word, but the electorate. In addition to the right to vote, voters have two options for directly influencing national politics:

- Referendums (→ p. 22)
- Popular initiatives (→ p. 22)

How new laws come about

Enacting new legislation takes time and consists of several stages. Many different actors are involved in the legislative process. Only once they have all shared their views, and the National Council and the Council of States agree on the wording of the law can the Federal Council bring the law into force. And, of course, only once the People have given their approval.



Legislation: When speed is of the essence

“Federal acts whose entry into force cannot be delayed (emergency federal acts) may be declared urgent by an absolute majority of the members of each of the two Councils and be brought into force immediately. Such acts must be of limited duration.” That is the wording of Article 165 of the Federal Constitution. In certain cases, the people can vote on ‘emergency federal acts’ retrospectively.



Swiss voters



8 Preliminary examination by the committee of the second chamber
The committee of the second chamber discusses the text approved by the first chamber and submits a proposal to its Council (second chamber).

9 Consultation in the second chamber (e.g. Council of States)
The second chamber has the same options as the first chamber: a decision not to consider the law, rejection of the text; or point by point deliberation before making a decision.

10 Resolution of differences in the first chamber
If the decisions of the National Council and the Council of States differ, a procedure for the resolution of differences is initiated. The committee of the first chamber makes a proposal to the first chamber.

13 Final vote in the first and second chambers
The jointly reached agreement is put to a final vote in the National Council and the Council of States. Parliament votes in favour of the new law.

12 Conference of conciliation
In the event of unresolved differences between the National Council and the Council of States after three rounds, a conference of conciliation is held. The conference is composed of members of the preliminary consultation committees who work together to find an agreement. The agreement is then submitted to the first chamber, and then to the second chamber.

11 Resolution of differences in the second chamber
After discussing and voting on this proposal, the preliminary consultation committee of the second chamber addresses the remaining differences and makes a proposal to the second chamber.

14 Optional referendum
The law adopted by Parliament is brought back to the People for a vote. The People have the last word (Referendum → p. 22). If a referendum is not sought within 100 days, the Federal Council may bring the law into force.

15 Popular vote
If a referendum is launched against the law, the law will be put to the vote of the People.

16 Entry into force
If the majority of voters approve the new law, the Federal Council can bring it into force.

The Parliamentary Services

In the Parliamentary Services, Parliament has its own staff office independent of the rest of the Federal Administration. It works on behalf of the National Council and the Council of States and ensures continuity from one legislature to the next.

Organising Council and parliamentary committee meetings

Before the Councils can take decisions in the sessions, all business is discussed in advance in the committees. The Secretariats therefore have to plan and organise a large number of meetings.

Advising Council members

In order to delve deeper into specific issues, Council members can submit research requests to the parliamentary library and have information compiled for them.

Documenting the legislative process

The Councils often take divergent decisions. To ensure that the legislative process and the lines of argument are comprehensible for the ongoing deliberations and for future generations, all committee and Council meetings are minuted. As Council meetings are public, these minutes are published on the Parliament website, almost in real time.

Assuring access to information

The Parliamentary Services operate a digital platform where all information and functions for parliamentary work are available in one place: information on items of business and meetings, on the biographies of Council members, on planning and conducting meetings, etc. The Parliamentary Services also maintain the digital presence of the National Council and the Council of States and inform the public about Parliament and its activities.

Supporting Parliament in fostering international relations

Relations with foreign countries increasingly take place on a parliamentary level. The Parliamentary Services support the Council presidents and the corresponding delegations in planning and carrying out visits abroad and in hosting visits by foreign guests and delegations to Switzerland.

Opening Parliament's doors to the public

Around 100,000 people visit Parliament every year. During the sessions, it is possible to follow Council debates from the galleries. Between sessions, the Parliamentary Services offer guided tours of the building. Open days are also held several times a year. It is worth booking early for session visits and guided tours.

Open Day schedule 2024
15 March (Museum Night)
4 May (childrens' programme)
1 August
26 October



Visiting the Parliament Building

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
66 million

Staff (FTEs) 2022
224



www.parliament.ch



Parliamentary Services,
Secretary General:
Philippe Schwab

Tilo

In 2023 a new artwork was unveiled on the façade of the Parliament Building. It consists of 246 ceramic tiles, which shimmer differently depending on the light.



As of 2023 the tympanum above the columns boasts a mosaic.

15 Swiss artists were invited to submit their projects. Studio Renée Levi from Basel was awarded the commission for the mosaic 'Tilo'. Each element of the mosaic represents one of the 200 seats in the National Council and 46 seats in the Council of States. The title of the work was chosen in honour of Tilo Frey, who was one of the first eleven women to enter the National Council in 1971. She was also the first person of colour to take a seat in the Federal Assembly. The newly designed gable of the Parliament Building (the tympanum) symbolises a parliament in a state of constant change. The ceramic tiles

reflect light both during the day and under illumination at night, lending the building a certain radiance. In addition, this visually creates movement in the static façade.

The work was unveiled at 18:48 on 12 September 2023 to mark the 175th anniversary of the Federal Constitution.

Film 'About Tilo'
(in German)



The Executive **The Government**

On 1 January each year, the Federal Chancellery publishes the official photo of the Federal Council. The president for that year gets to decide the

design and select the photographer. The design for 2024 was chosen by Viola Amherd as she is president this year.





The Executive

The Government

The Federal Council is Switzerland's government. It consists of seven members, who take decisions and defend their decisions in a collegial manner. The presidency rotates every year. The Federal Council is assisted in its tasks by the Federal Administration. The Confederation's expenditure may not exceed its receipts over the longer term: this is ensured by the debt brake mechanism. Parliament decides on the federal budget.

www.admin.ch



Taxes and finances



Video
The Federal Council – a brief guide

Federal finances: Parliament has the final say

In order to fulfil its tasks, the Confederation needs money. The Federal Constitution sets out what taxes the government can raise. When it comes to spending money, the Federal Council cannot just do as it sees fit: there is a legal basis for every item of expenditure that is the result of a democratic process.

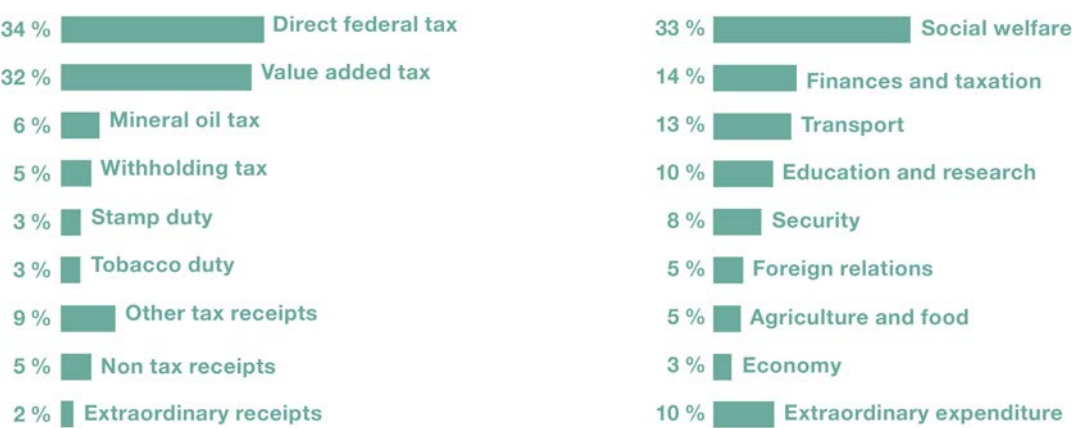
Parliament has sovereignty over federal finances: it decides the budget and approves the state financial statement of the previous year. (→ p. 33, p. 38).

Debt brake mechanism

The Confederation is required to balance its expenditure and receipts over the longer term. It is required to run a surplus when the economy is thriving and may spend more than it collects in receipts when the economy is weak. The debt brake does allow for an exception to be made in extraordinary situations such as serious economic crises, pandemics and natural disasters; the government may then undertake additional expenditure.

That was the case between 2020 and 2022, for example, when it made around CHF 30 billion available to cushion the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in high deficits during those years.

Federal receipts and expenditure 2022



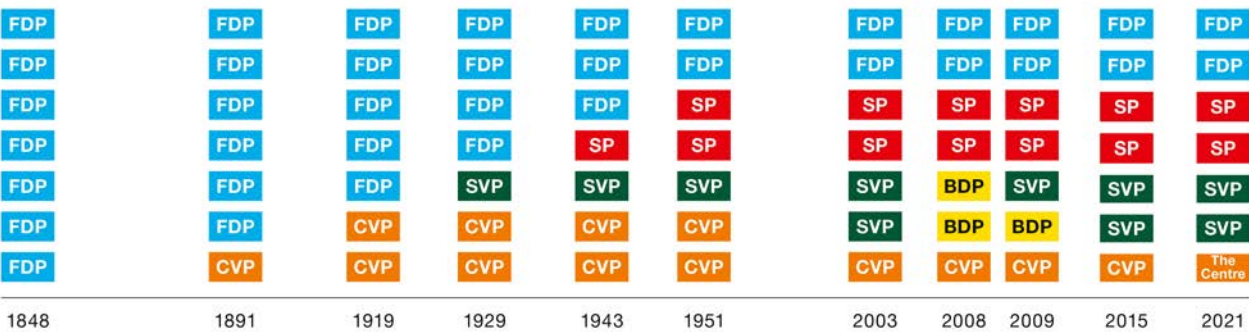
Receipts of 77 billion

Direct federal tax and VAT are the Confederation’s main sources of receipts. Direct federal tax is raised on the income of private individuals (progressive, max. 11.5 %), and on business profits (8.5 %). VAT is 8.1 % on most goods and services.

Expenditure of CHF 81 billion

One third of federal expenditure is spent on social welfare. 50 % of this goes to old-age provision (OASI), 15 % to invalidity insurance (II). In addition, there are supplementary benefits, unemployment insurance (UI), premium reductions for health insurance and expenditure related to the costs of migration.

Political party composition of the Federal Council since 1848



1848 The Federal Council was composed of seven members of the Free Democratic Party (today FDP.The Liberals). The party governed alone for 43 years.

1891 The first member of the Catholic Conservatives (today CVP) joined the government; the second joined in **1919**.

1929 Parliament elected a member of the Farmers’, Trades’ and Citizens’ Party (today SVP) to the Federal Council.

1943 The first Social Democrat (SP) entered the government; the second followed in **1951**.

1959 The four strongest parties agreed to form a government by applying the ‘magic formula’: 2 FDP, 2 CVP, 2 SP, 1 SVP. The formula remained unchanged for 44 years.

2003 At the Federal Council elections, the SVP won a seat at the expense of the CVP.

2008 The two representatives of the SVP joined the newly founded Conservative Democratic Party (BDP).

2009 A member of the SVP was elected in place of a retiring BDP representative.

2015 The BDP representative stepped down. Parliament elected an SVP representative in her place.

Since then The Federal Council has again been composed of members from four different political parties – according to the 2:2:2:1 formula. Since 2021 the CVP has been represented in the Federal Council under its new name ‘The Centre’ (since its merger with the BDP).

The Federal Council

The Federal Council comprises seven members of equal standing. They are elected by Parliament every four years, with a different member holding the post of president each year. The current members of the Federal Council are drawn from four different parties. Four come from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, two from the French-speaking part and one from the Italian-speaking region.

The Federal Council normally meets every week. Especially demanding issues are discussed in special sessions. Each year, it decides on more than 2,500 items of business. The seven departments and the Federal Chancellery support the Federal Council by helping to prepare the meetings.

Important dates
Election of the president of the Swiss Confederation and vice president of the Federal Council: 11 December 2024
Election of the Federal Council: mid-December 2027 (following the parliamentary elections in October 2027)

President of the Swiss Confederation



Viola Amherd

Head of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport
Member of the Federal Council since 2019

Party affiliation
The Centre

Vice President



Karin Keller-Sutter

Head of the Federal Department of Finance
Member of the Federal Council since 2019

Party affiliation
FDP



Guy Parmelin

Head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research
Member of the Federal Council since 2016

Party affiliation
SVP



Ignazio Cassis

Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
Member of the Federal Council since 2017

Party affiliation
FDP

The president is of equal standing to the other members of the Federal Council, but chairs the meetings and represents the government in its external dealings

What is special about the Federal Council?

Collegiality

Switzerland is the only country in the world that has a collegial body as its government: the seven members of the Federal Council are each members of the college and have equal rights. The president of the Swiss Confederation chairs the meetings and represents the government in its external dealings. The presidency rotates each year.

Consensus

The members of the Federal Council often have conflicting views and values. However, they always seek a consensus and reach their decisions together. Outwardly, the Federal Council presents a united front: the members of the Federal Council defend the decisions they have taken jointly, even if these decisions are contrary to their own opinions or the position taken by their party.

Consociationalism

The Federal Constitution requires Switzerland's regions and languages to be 'appropriately represented' in the Federal Council. The parties are expected to propose both male and female candidates for election. Normally Parliament allocates seats on the Federal Council according to the strength of the political parties: as a result, all the largest parties are represented in the government.

Magic Formula

2:2:2:1 is the endlessly debated formula for the political composition of the Federal Council: the largest three parties each hold two seats in the Federal Council, while the fourth largest party has one seat. For 44 years (1959 – 2003), the Federal Council was made up of 2 FDP, 2 SP and 2 CVP representatives, and 1 SVP representative. Since 2003, there has been a minor shift: 2 FDP, 2 SP, 2 SVP, 1 CVP ('The Centre' from 2021).

Stability

The members of the Federal Council are elected by Parliament to serve a four-year term of office and cannot be removed. They can be re-elected any number of times. Normally a member of the Federal Council remains in office until he or she retires or chooses not to stand again for election.

Not elected by the People

The Swiss electorate has already voted three times on whether the Federal Council should be elected by the Swiss people: in 1900, 1942 and 2013. On each occasion, both the People and the cantons voted against. An election by the People has also been proposed several times in Parliament, but each of these proposals was rejected.



Albert Rösti

Head of the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications
Member of the Federal Council since 2023

Party affiliation
SVP



Elisabeth Baume-Schneider

Head of the Federal Department of home Affairs
Member of the Federal Council since 2023

Party affiliation
SP



Beat Jans

Head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police
Member of the Federal Council since 2024

Party affiliation
SP

Federal Chancellor



Viktor Rossi

In office since 2024

Party affiliation
GLP

The Federal Chancellor is the Federal Council's chief of staff and heads the Federal Chancellery (→ p. 56). He is also elected by Parliament.

The Federal Council's tasks



Preparing legislation

The Federal Council submits new laws to Parliament and proposals on how to implement decisions taken in popular votes. Its proposals receive broad support: they take account of the views of the cantons, parties, associations and concerned groups, which are expressed in a consultation process. After these consultations, the Federal Council submits its bill to Parliament for debate and a decision.



Providing information

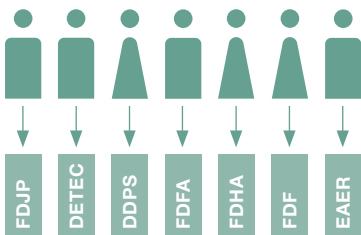
The Federal Council informs the cantons, Parliament and the public about its decisions via a range of channels. It explains proposals that are being voted in a red booklet, which is posted to voters with their ballot papers and published on the internet.

- Instagram:** @gov.ch
- X (Twitter):** @BR_Sprecher
- YouTube:** Swiss Federal Council
- Web:** www.admin.ch, www.ch.ch
- Apps:** VoteInfo, CH info



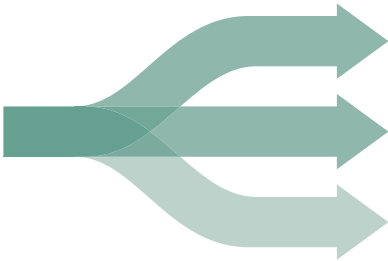
Implementing the decisions of Parliament

As soon as Parliament has decided on a new law, the Federal Council issues the required ordinances. They set out the specifics on how the new law should be implemented. If Parliament requests particular measures, the Federal Council ensures that these are taken.



Heading the Federal Administration

The Federal Council is in charge of the Federal Administration, which has around 40,000 employees. The Administration is organised into seven government departments. Each member of the Federal Council is the head of a department (→ p. 54/55).



Planning for the future

The Federal Council sets the agenda for the future: it issues a mission statement, sets goals and indicates how it plans to invest federal funds. It has to find majority support for its plans, in Parliament and if need be among the People and the cantons.

Federal Council mission statement for the legislative period 2023–2027

1. Switzerland secures its long-term prosperity and harnesses the opportunities of digitalisation.
2. Switzerland promotes national and intergenerational cohesion.

3. Switzerland safeguards security, is committed to peace and acts coherently and reliably in the world.
4. Switzerland protects the climate and takes care of natural resources.

Governing in times of crisis

If Switzerland's internal or external security is endangered and if there is an imminent threat, the Federal Council has the power to issue emergency ordinances of limited duration if it is unable to take measures based on existing legislation (Federal Constitution Art. 185). In the event of there being an exceptional risk to public health, the Epidemics Act confers wide-ranging powers on the Federal Council. In the event of severe shortages, the Federal Council may order measures to ensure the national economic supply of essential goods and services (National Economic Supply Act). In addition, the Asylum Act, the Debt Enforcement and Bankruptcy Act, the Customs Tariff Act and the Telecommunications Act also provide the Federal Council with powers to deal with crisis situations.



President of the Swiss Confederation 2024
Viola Amherd

Madam President, what are your priorities for the year ahead?

We are at the beginning of a new legislative period and there is a sense of starting afresh. So, we want to take advantage of that to address the big issues. One of those is settling relations with the European Union. That will not only benefit the people of Switzerland, but also our economy, our financial centre, our healthcare system and our standing as a centre for research. The impact of the war in Ukraine will continue to preoccupy us. The war has reminded us that security forms the basis for the functioning of our country. People in our country feel its effects in their everyday lives – the rise in electricity prices, for example, which are a burden on many households.

What are your personal goals for your year as president?

I will be guided by three main principles: confidence, consensus and foresight. We need consensus because, thanks to our institutions, we can only make decisions together; in other words, we must open towards each other. And we need the foresight to find smart long-term solutions.

And what do you understand by confidence?

We have every reason to be confident! Experience shows that we are resilient, even in difficult times. Federalism and our system of part-time public service are among our strengths. They ensure that people throughout the country get involved and take on responsibility. This means that we meet as equals and that everyone has a say in the direction we want to take.

Federal Administration

Staff office

FCh

Federal Chancellery

Viktor Rossi

Federal Chancellor

FDFA

Federal Department
of Foreign Affairs

Ignazio Cassis

Head of Department

General Secretariat

State Secretariat

Directorate of International
Law

Consular Directorate

Swiss Agency for
Development and
Cooperation

Directorate for Resources

FDHA

Federal Department
of Home Affairs

Elisabeth Baume-Schneider

Head of Department

General Secretariat

Federal Office of Culture

Federal Office of Meteorology
and Climatology MeteoSwiss

Federal Office of Public
Health

Federal Food Safety and
Veterinary Office

Federal Statistical Office

Federal Social Insurance
Office

Federal Office for Gender
Equality

Swiss Federal Archives

Autonomous organisations

Swiss Agency for Therapeutic
Products Swissmedic

Swiss National Museum

Swiss Arts Council
Pro Helvetia

FDJP

Federal Department
of Justice and Police

Beat Jans

Head of Department

General Secretariat

State Secretariat for Migration

Federal Office of Justice

Federal Office of Police fedpol

Post and Telecommunications
Surveillance Service

Autonomous organisations

Federal Institute of
Intellectual Property

Federal Institute of Metrology

Swiss Institute of
Comparative Law

Federal Audit Oversight
Authority

Federal Gaming Board

Federal Commission on
Migration

Federal Arbitration Commis-
sion for the Exploitation of
Copyrights and Related
Rights

National Commission for the
Prevention of Torture

42,305 (38,058 full-time equivalents) staff work
in the Federal Administration. 1,102 of those are
apprentices, 594 are graduate interns.

The Federal Administration supports the Federal Council in its tasks. It consists of seven government departments and the Federal Chancellery. While each department is headed by a federal councillor, the Federal Administration as a whole is supervised by the full Federal Council.

DDPS Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport Viola Amherd Head of Department General Secretariat State Secretariat for Security Policy National Cyber Security Centre Federal Office for Civil Protection Federal Office for Defence Procurement armasuisse Federal Office of Topography Federal Office of Sport Defence sector Federal Intelligence Service Office of the Armed Forces Attorney General	FDF Federal Department of Finance Karin Keller-Sutter Head of Department General Secretariat State Secretariat for International Finance Federal Office for Customs and Border Security Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunications Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics Federal Finance Administration Federal Office of Personnel Federal Tax Administration Autonomous organisations Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority Swiss Federal Audit Office Federal Pension Fund PUBLICA	EAER Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research Guy Parmelin Head of Department General Secretariat State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation Federal Office for Agriculture Federal Office for National Economic Supply Federal Office for Housing Federal Office for Civilian Service Autonomous organisations Office of the Price Supervisor Competition Commission Board of the Federal Institutes of Technology ETH Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training Swiss Innovation Agency Innosuisse	DETEC Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications Albert Rösti Head of Department General Secretariat Federal Office of Transport Federal Office of Civil Aviation Swiss Federal Office of Energy Federal Roads Office Federal Office of Communications Federal Office for the Environment Federal Office for Spatial Development Autonomous organisations Swiss Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate Federal Inspectorate for Heavy Current Installations Swiss Transportation Safety Investigation Board Federal Electricity Commission Federal Communications Commission Independent Complaints Authority for Radio and Television Federal Postal Services Commission Rail Transport Commission
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Over 260 different professions can be learnt in Switzerland – 50 of those in the Federal Administration.

Federal Chancellery

The Federal Chancellery is the staff office of the Federal Council: it ensures that the Federal Council is able to take sound decisions and communicate them in a coordinated manner. As the custodian of people's rights, it organises federal elections and votes and verifies the legality of initiatives and referendums.



In addition to the print version of the Federal Council's explanatory statements, the Federal Chancellery also produces videos to explain each proposal.



Viktor Rossi,
Federal Chancellor since 2024

Preparing Federal Council decisions

The Federal Council normally holds a meeting once a week to deal with numerous items of business. Prior to the meeting, the federal departments and offices can give their input on the items on the agenda. The Federal Council coordinates this joint reporting procedure.

Communicating Federal Council decisions

After every Federal Council meeting, the Federal Council Spokesperson goes before the press to announce the Federal Council's decisions. Federal Council decisions and reports are published in the Federal Gazette, while new or amended acts and ordinances are published in the Official Compilation of Federal Legislation.

Planning for the future

The Federal Chancellery monitors national and international developments and, on the basis of these, establishes the need for political action. It is responsible for Federal Council planning and controlling: for the four-year legislature planning, the annual objectives and reporting.

Supporting the president

In 2024 Federal Councillor Viola Amherd will assume additional tasks at home and abroad in her capacity as president (→ p. 50). The Federal Chancellery provides support and ensures continuity from one presidential year to the next.

Coordinating the work of the Federal Administration

The Federal Chancellor chairs the monthly meetings of the Conference of Secretaries General, at which the secretaries general coordinate the work of their departments. The Digital Transformation and ICT Steering (DTI) division coordinates activities in the field of digitalisation.

Overseeing democratic rights

The Federal Chancellery ensures that all federal elections and popular votes are conducted correctly. It provides the necessary information on the proper procedures to anyone interested in launching a popular initiative or referendum (→ p. 22ff.). It is also working with the cantons to prepare for the future introduction of online voting (e-voting) throughout Switzerland.

Promoting multilingualism

Switzerland's official languages are German, French and Italian, and all legal and official federal texts must be available in these languages. In certain cases they must also be produced in Romansh. Texts of international relevance are also produced in English. The Federal Chancellery is responsible for the quality of the translations.

Publishing information through a range of channels

Before a federal vote is held, the Federal Chancellery sends explanatory material to all voters and updates the information on the VoteInfo app. Before federal elections, it sends out voting instructions. Up-to-date and detailed information is provided on two websites, in explanatory videos and in this brochure 'The Swiss Confederation – a brief guide'.

- Instagram: @gov.ch
- X (Twitter): @SwissGov
- YouTube: Swiss Federal Council
- Web: www.admin.ch, www.ch.ch
- Apps: VoteInfo, CH info

Vice Chancellor and Federal Council Spokesperson:
André Simonazzi

Vice Chancellor a.i.:
Jörg De Bernardi

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
124 million

Staff (FTEs) 2022
288



www.bk.admin.ch

Autonomous organisation

Office of the Federal Data
Protection and Information
Commissioner FDPIC:
Adrian Lobsiger
www.edoeb.admin.ch

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

The FDFA safeguards Switzerland's foreign policy interests. It maintains relations with other states and international bodies such as the EU and the UN. It provides services for Swiss citizens abroad. The FDFA is also responsible for Switzerland's development cooperation and humanitarian aid. There are around 170 Swiss representations around the world.



The FDFA Helpline is available around the clock to answer your questions about consular services and to assist you in an emergency abroad.



“Peace is never a given,
you have to build it,
from day to day.”

Ignazio Cassis, head of the FDFA.
Member of the Federal Council since 2017.

The armed conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as in many other parts of the world, show how important security, peace and stability are. Switzerland works actively to uphold these principles, for example through its good offices, and contributes its expertise to the UN Security Council in the search for sustainable solutions. At the same time, the Confederation supports specific local projects, for example humanitarian demining in Ukraine, which is a key prerequisite for Ukraine’s recovery. Switzerland will host an international conference on humanitarian demining in Geneva in autumn 2024.

As a country at the heart of Europe, Switzerland is committed to a stable security architecture on the European continent. To this end, it is in close dialogue with its European partners. A prerequisite for stability is a strong economy. This is why the further development and stabilisation of Switzerland’s bilateral agreements with the EU, by far its most important trading partner, is a priority for the Federal Council.

The Federal Council will soon adopt and begin to implement its Foreign Policy Strategy 2024–27. The strategy aims to position Switzerland in a rapidly changing world and to set out priorities and objectives accordingly. It provides the guiding framework for a coherent foreign policy for Switzerland for the next four years.

General Secretariat GS-FDFA

Secretary General: Markus Seiler
www.fdfa.admin.ch

State Secretariat StS

State Secretary:
Alexandre Fasel

Directorate of International

Law DIL
Director: Franz Perrez

Consular Directorate CD

Director: David Grichting

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

Director: Patricia Danzi
www.fdfa.admin.ch/sdc

Directorate for Resources DR

Director: Tania Cavassini

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
3.29 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
5,469



www.fdfa.admin.ch

Federal Department of Home Affairs FDHA

The FDHA works to ensure the country has an efficient and effective health system that is accessible to all. It is also committed to protecting the pension system – state and occupational pensions – into the future. Its areas of activity include promoting cultural diversity and cohesion in society, gender equality and the integration of people with disabilities.



Food safety and animal health are also among the tasks of the FDHA. FSVO border veterinarians check the import of animals at Geneva airport.



“Equality, solidarity and diversity are essential values that the FDHA defends and promotes on a daily basis.”

Elisabeth Baume-Schneider, head of the FDHA.
Member of the Federal Council since 2023.

The FDHA works to strengthen social cohesion, by ensuring gender equality and solidarity between generations, improving the integration of people with disabilities and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity. A further priority is the fight against racism.

The tasks performed by the staff of the FDHA have a direct impact on people’s everyday lives in a wide range of fields: social security and occupational pensions, containing costs in the health sector and authorising new medicines, promoting culture, food safety and animal health, providing reliable weather forecasts and statistics.

The Department is currently implementing numerous reform projects to ensure an efficient health system that is accessible to all, favourable framework conditions for the cultural sector, and social insurance schemes that are financially stable in the long term to support people at all stages of life.

General Secretariat GS-FDHA

Secretary General: Stefan Hostettler
www.edi.admin.ch

Federal Office of Culture
FOC

Director: Carine Bachmann
www.bak.admin.ch

Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology
MeteoSwiss

Director:
Christoph Appenzeller
www.meteoschweiz.admin.ch

Federal Office of Public Health FOPH

Director: Anne Lévy
www.bag.admin.ch

Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office FSVO

Director: Hans Wyss
www.blv.admin.ch

Federal Statistical Office
FSO

Director:
Georges-Simon Ulrich
www.bfs.admin.ch

Federal Social Insurance Office FSIO

Director: Stéphane Rossini
www.bsv.admin.ch

Federal Office for Gender Equality FOG

Director: Sylvie Durrer
www.ebg.admin.ch

Swiss Federal Archives
SFA

Director: Philippe Künzler
www.bar.admin.ch

Autonomous organisations

Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products
Swissmedic

Director: Raimund T. Bruhin
www.swissmedic.ch

Swiss National Museum
SNM

Director: Denise Tonella
www.nationalmuseum.ch

Swiss Arts Council
Pro Helvetia

Director: Philippe Bischof
www.prohelvetia.ch

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
20 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
2,678



www.edi.admin.ch

Federal Department of Justice and Police FDJP

The FDJP draws up laws to respond to societal challenges and create equal opportunities. It monitors compliance with the law and so guarantees legal certainty. It regulates the conditions under which foreign nationals may enter Switzerland, live and work here or receive asylum. It also coordinates national and international police cooperation with the aim of safeguarding the security of the entire population.





“Human dignity forms the basis of our policies. The aim is justice, liberty and happiness.”

Beat Jans, head of the FDJP.
Member of the Federal Council since 2024.

Almost all Swiss citizens have an FDJP product at home or on their person: a Swiss passport or ID card. The FDJP renewed the passport design in 2022, adapting it to the latest standards. The new design received the accolade of ‘Best new passport’ in an international competition.

One of the FDJP’s core concerns is migration policy. It is important that the necessary decisions be taken as quickly as possible so that those in need of our protection can be integrated into society as well as possible. This also means that they can help solve the labour shortage. Unaccompanied minors pose a particular challenge at the federal asylum centres. The FDJP ensures that these children are accommodated and cared for in an age-appropriate manner. A quick decision also facilitates the departure of persons not eligible for protection in Switzerland.

A further focus of the FDJP is on fighting human trafficking. These efforts are coordinated nationally and internationally. The FDJP works to ensure good cooperation between all partners so that victims can be protected and the perpetrators punished.

The FDJP is also overseeing work on preparing a legal basis for an official digital identity (E-ID). In future, users should be able to provide digital proof of their identity securely, quickly and easily while having the greatest possible control over their data.

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
2.99 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
2,794



www.ejpd.admin.ch

General Secretariat GS-FDJP

Secretary General: Nora Bertschi

www.ejpd.admin.ch

State Secretariat for Migration SEM
State Secretary:
Christine Schraner Burgener
www.sem.admin.ch

Federal Office of Justice FOJ
Director: Michael Schöll
www.bj.admin.ch

Federal Office of Police fedpol
Director:
Nicoletta della Valle
www.fedpol.admin.ch

Post and Telecommunications Surveillance Service PTSS
Director: Daniela Schär
www.li.admin.ch

Autonomous organisations

Federal Institute of Intellectual Property IIP
Director:
Catherine Chammartin
www.ige.ch

Federal Institute of Metrology METAS
Director: Philippe Richard
www.metas.ch

Swiss Institute of Comparative Law SICL
Director: vacant
www.isdc.ch

Federal Audit Oversight Authority FAOA
Director: Reto Sanwald
www.rab-asr.ch

Federal Gaming Board FGB
Responsible: Thomas Fritschi
www.esbk.admin.ch

Federal Commission on Migration FCM
President: Manuele Bertoli
www.ekm.admin.ch

Federal Arbitration Commission for the Exploitation of Copyrights and Related Rights
President:
Helen Kneubühler Dienst
www.eschk.admin.ch

National Commission for the Prevention of Torture NCPT
President: Martina Caroni
www.nkvf.admin.ch

Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport DDPS

The DDPS is responsible for Switzerland's security policy – that policy is implemented through the Armed Forces, the State Secretariat for Security Policy, the Federal Office for Civil Protection, the Federal Intelligence Service, armasuisse and the National Cyber Security Centre. The role of the DDPS also involves promoting sport through the Federal Office for Sport and producing geoinformation through swisstopo.



Cyberthreats concern us all. The DDPS is strengthening Switzerland's cybersecurity.



“We must be prepared to ensure the security of our country in the face of multiple threats.”

Viola Amherd, head of the DDPS.
Member of the Federal Council since 2019.
President of the Swiss Confederation in 2024.

The Federal Council has decided to strengthen areas dedicated to security within the DDPS. To that end a State Secretariat for Security Policy (SEPOS) has been created and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has been incorporated into the DDPS.

This will enable the DDPS to cope even better with the numerous challenges posed by the constantly changing threat situation. The war in Ukraine has confirmed and laid out the growing threat of hybrid conflict – including disinformation and influence operations, cyber attacks, covert operations and armed conflict. Switzerland must therefore be prepared to face these threats.

The security situation in Europe has triggered a new dynamic and opened up new opportunities for security and defence cooperation. We can counter threats more effectively if we work together as partners. That is why Switzerland has decided to focus its security and defence policy more consistently on international cooperation while maintaining its neutrality.

As part of NATO's Partnership for Peace, Switzerland has set itself the goal of promoting security policy dialogue in the Euro-Atlantic area and contributing to peace, democracy and security in Europe through concrete cooperation. In particular, this involves expanding cooperation in the cyber area.

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
8.24 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
12,128



www.vbs.admin.ch

General Secretariat GS-DDPS

Secretary General: Daniel Büchel
www.vbs.admin.ch

State Secretariat for Security Policy SEPOS

State Secretary:
Markus Mäder
www.sepos.admin.ch

National Cyber Security Centre NCSC

Director: Florian Schütz
www.ncsc.admin.ch

Federal Office for Civil Protection FOCP

Director: Michaela Schärer
www.babs.admin.ch

Federal Office for Defence Procurement armasuisse

Chief of Defence Procurement: Urs Loher
www.ar.admin.ch

Federal Office of Topography swisstopo

Director: Fridolin Wicki
www.swisstopo.admin.ch

Federal Office of Sport FOSPO

Director: Matthias Remund
www.baspo.admin.ch

Defence sector

Chief of the Armed Forces:
Lieutenant General
Thomas Süssli
www.vtg.admin.ch

Federal Intelligence Service FIS

Director: Christian Dussey
www.fis.admin.ch

Office of the Armed Forces Attorney General

Armed Forces Attorney
General: Stefan Flachsmann
www.oa.admin.ch

Federal Department of Finance

FDF

Federal finances, financial market stability, taxes – at the FDF, there is a lot of emphasis on the state budget and on financial policy. The department collects taxes and customs duties, and checks the cross-border movement of people and goods. It also provides services for the entire Federal Administration, from IT to human resources to buildings and logistics.



Around 43,000 counterfeit products are discovered every year – with a trained eye Swiss Customs staff strive to put a stop to this illicit practice.



“A state that has room for manoeuvre is the best insurance against a crisis. This requires sound public finances.”

Karin Keller-Sutter, head of the FDF.
Member of the Federal Council since 2019.

In order for a state to protect its citizens, the economy and the environment, it needs to be able to act freely. It must have enough funds available to take action at short notice. And its finances must be on a sure enough footing for it to provide assistance in a crisis.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, this principle was also demonstrated during the crisis surrounding Credit Suisse. The Federal Council, working together with the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority and the Swiss National Bank, managed to prevent a disorderly collapse of the bank. The institutional setup worked. This enabled the takeover of Credit Suisse by UBS, which meant that stability could rapidly be restored. It was thus possible to avert any significant damage to the economy, and also to individuals.

This was possible only because the federal government had sufficient funds at its disposal. So that Switzerland is also primed against future crises, lessons must be learned from recent events and adjustments made where necessary. One thing is already certain: although every crisis is different, when it comes to the crunch, stability can only be achieved with sound federal finances. Receipts and expenditure therefore need to balance each other out. So the focus is on budgetary discipline. As the saying goes: “Save your pennies for a rainy day.”

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
17.86 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
8,756



www.efd.admin.ch

General Secretariat GS-FDF

Secretary General: Barbara Hübscher Schmuki
www.efd.admin.ch

State Secretariat for International Finance SIF

State Secretary:
Daniela Stoffel
www.sif.admin.ch

Federal Office for Customs and Border Security FOCBS

Director: Pascal Lüthi
www.bazg.admin.ch

Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunications FOITT

Director: Dirk Lindemann
www.bit.admin.ch

Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics FOBL

Director: Pierre Broye
www.bbl.admin.ch

Federal Finance Administration FFA

Director:
Sabine D’Amelio-Favez
www.efv.admin.ch

Federal Office of Personnel FOPER

Director: Rahel von Kaenel
www.epa.admin.ch

Federal Tax Administration FTA

Director: Tamara Pfammatter
www.estv.admin.ch

Autonomous organisations

Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority FINMA

Director: Stefan Walter
www.finma.ch

Swiss Federal Audit Office SFAO

Director: Pascal Stirnimann
www.efk.admin.ch

Federal Pension Fund PUBLICA

Director: Doris Bianchi
www.publica.ch

Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research EAER

The EAER defines framework conditions for the economy and the labour market. It sets the rules that apply in the private sector and in agriculture, and represents the interests of the Swiss economy abroad. It is responsible for organising vocational and professional education and training and promotes research. The EAER also has the task of making sure that the country is supplied with essential goods.



New vocational qualifications such as 'solar installer' and 'solar technician' are helping to meet the demand for skilled labour in the rapidly growing solar industry.



“Switzerland’s prosperity is due in large part to its liberal economic order.”

Guy Parmelin, head of the EAER.
Member of the Federal Council since 2016.

In economic terms, Switzerland is among the world leaders. The chemical and pharmaceutical industries, together with the medical technology and biotechnology sectors, form a life science cluster that is unique in the world. To boost the economy and improve prosperity, the EAER draws on Switzerland’s liberal economic tradition and focuses on creating good framework conditions to encourage competitiveness, innovation and the labour market.

Competitiveness also means maintaining a good relationship with the EU as well as with other important economic partners worldwide. In this context, trade agreements seek to remove administrative hurdles and ensure that – to the greatest extent possible – the same rules apply to all market players.

In addition, the EAER is continuously seeking to expand international research and innovation cooperation activities. Start-ups play an important role especially in the life sciences sector. That is why the innovation agency Innosuisse is now able to provide even greater support to innovation projects put forward by young companies at an earlier stage in the process.

The Swiss labour market is fortunate to record almost full employment. However, nearly all sectors are experiencing a shortage of skilled workers. To meet this global challenge, Switzerland is primarily striving to promote the potential of domestic skilled workers by encouraging continuing education and training, STEM subjects and new vocational apprenticeships.

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
12.67 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
2,212



www.wbf.admin.ch

General Secretariat GS-EAER

Secretary General: Nathalie Goumaz
www.wbf.admin.ch

State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO

State Secretary:
Helene Budliger Artieda
www.seco.admin.ch

State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI

State Secretary:
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www.seri.admin.ch

Federal Office for Agriculture FOAG

Director: Christian Hofer
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Federal Office for National Economic Supply FONES

Delegate: Hans Häfliger
www.fones.admin.ch

Federal Office for Housing FOH

Director: Martin Tschirren
www.bwo.admin.ch

Federal Office for Civilian Service CIVI

Director: Christoph Hartmann
www.zivi.admin.ch

Autonomous organisations

Office of the Price Supervisor

Price Supervisor:
Stefan Meierhans
www.preisueberwacher.admin.ch

Competition Commission COMCO

Director: Patrik Ducrey
www.weko.admin.ch

Board of the Federal Institutes of Technology ETH

President of the ETH Board:
Michael O. Hengartner
www.ethrat.ch

Swiss Federal University for Vocational Education and Training SFUVET

Director: Barbara Fontanellaz
www.sfivet.swiss

Swiss Innovation Agency Innosuisse

Director: Annalise Eggimann
www.innosuisse.ch

Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications DETEC

Roads, rail, power and the media: DETEC assures Switzerland’s basic public services. But it also takes care of our natural environment: woodlands, landscape, water, air, plants and animals. DETEC pursues a climate policy that is also beneficial for the economy.



It takes investment to keep trains rolling.



“DETEC ensures that our roads and railways are up to speed. That benefits the whole of Switzerland.”

Albert Rösti, head of DETEC.
Member of the Federal Council since 2023.

Good transport infrastructure is vital to Switzerland. It allows people and businesses to move around efficiently, and ensures that our towns, cities and rural areas are well connected. DETEC makes sure that our transport routes meet the most modern standards and so help strengthen national cohesion and support economic growth and prosperity. That means expanding and upgrading the railway and highway networks.

Around CHF 27 billion will be invested in over 300 rail expansion projects by 2035 in both passenger and freight transport; examples include projects in and around the cities of Lausanne, Geneva, Bern, Basel, Zurich, Winterthur, St. Gallen and Bellinzona. In addition, the Lötschberg base tunnel through the Alps will be upgraded for double-track operation. These projects will increase network capacity, allowing more rail services to operate using longer compositions and double-decker trains, thereby boosting the appeal of public transport.

On the national highways and in urban transport, upgrades are also taking place in a targeted manner to eliminate bottlenecks and to be able to meet the growing need for mobility. Several sections of the A1 – the most important link between western and eastern Switzerland – are to be widened to six lanes, for example. Parliament has also decided on a number of further upgrades. In implementing projects, DETEC strives to ensure that environmental considerations are taken into account and that land is used sparingly.

Expenses 2022 (CHF)
13.93 bn

Staff (FTEs) 2022
2,474



www.uvek.admin.ch

General Secretariat GS-DETEC

Secretary General: Yves Bichsel
www.uvek.admin.ch

Federal Office of Transport
FOT

Director: Peter Füglistaler
Director (from 01-08-2024):
Christa Hostettler
www.bav.admin.ch

Federal Office of Civil
Aviation FOCA

Director: Christian Hegner
www.bazl.admin.ch

Swiss Federal Office
of Energy SFOE

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Federal Roads Office
FEDRO

Director: Jürg Röthlisberger
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Federal Office of
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Federal Office for the
Environment FOEN

Director:
Katrin Schneeberger
www.bafu.admin.ch

Federal Office for Spatial
Development ARE

Director: Maria Lezzi
www.are.admin.ch

Autonomous
organisations

Swiss Federal Nuclear
Safety Inspectorate ENSI

Director: Marc Kenzelmann
www.ensi.ch

Federal Inspectorate for
Heavy Current Installations
ESTI

Director: Daniel Otti
www.esti.admin.ch

Swiss Transportation
Safety Investigation Board
STSB

President: Pieter Zeilstra
www.sust.admin.ch

Federal Electricity
Commission ElCom

President: Werner Luginbühl
www.elcom.admin.ch

Federal Communications
Commission ComCom

President:
Adrienne Corboud Fumagalli
www.comcom.admin.ch

Independent Complaints
Authority for Radio and
Television ICA

President:
Mascha Santschi Kallay
www.ubi.admin.ch

Federal Postal Services
Commission PostCom

President:
Anne Seydoux-Christe
www.postcom.admin.ch

Rail Transport Commission
RailCom

President:
Patrizia Daniöth Halter
www.railcom.admin.ch

The Judiciary **The Courts**

Every year in March, the presidents of the federal courts present their annual reports at a media conference. The event usually takes place in the plenary hall at the headquarters of the

Federal Supreme Court in Lausanne. In addition to a review of the previous judicial business year, the meeting also provides an opportunity for contact and direct dialogue with the journalists accredited to the courts.





The Judiciary

The Courts

There are four federal courts. The highest court is the **Federal Supreme Court**, which rules in the final instance on cases from almost all areas of law. **The three federal courts of first instance have different tasks. The Federal Criminal Court is responsible for criminal matters of particular importance to the Swiss Confederation as well as for appeals concerning international mutual assistance in criminal matters. The Federal Administrative Court rules on appeals against decisions of the federal administrative authorities and the Federal Patent Court on disputes over invention patents.**

www.eidgenoessischegerichte.ch



Video
The Federal Supreme Court

Multilevel procedure

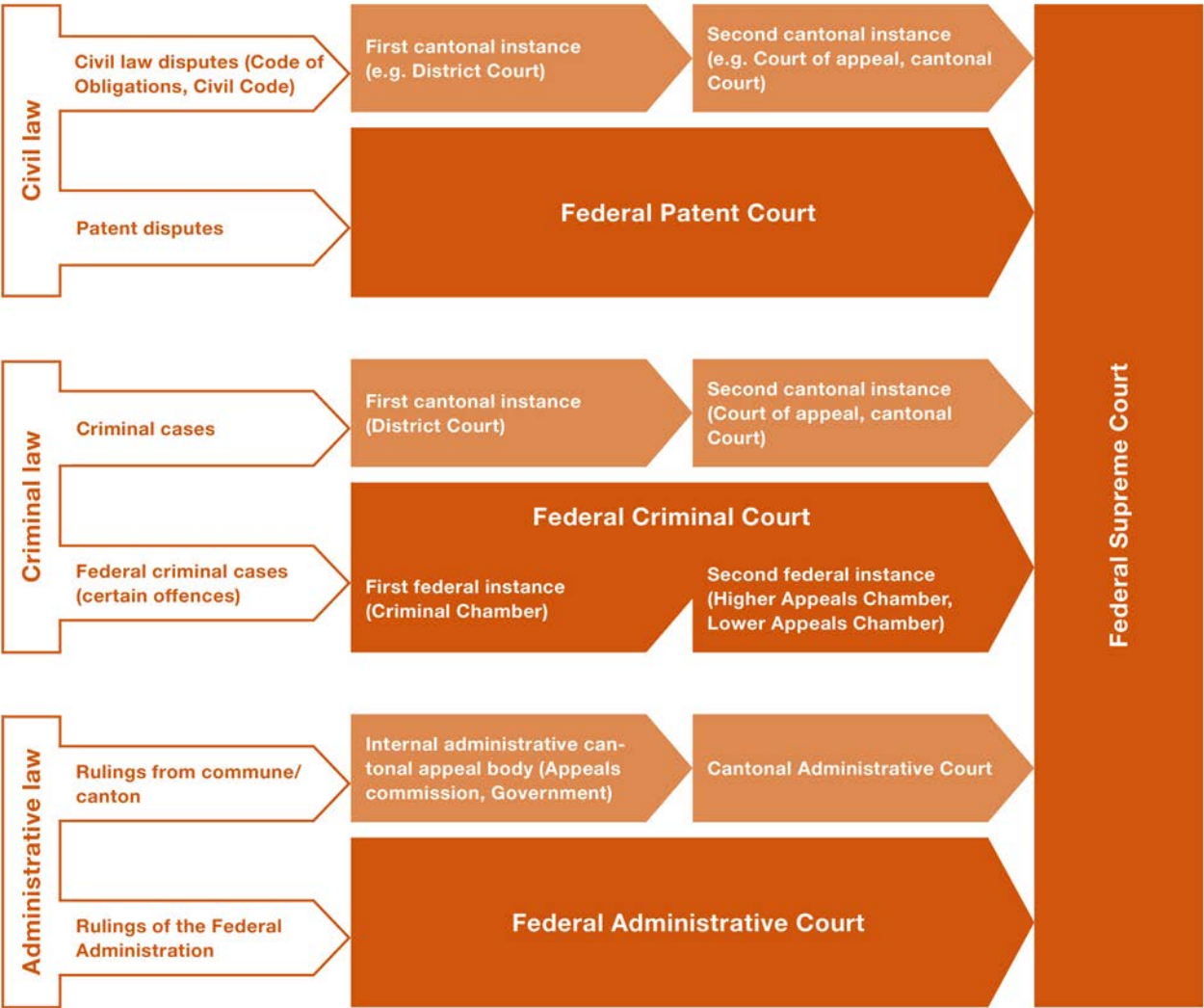
Cantonal courts or the federal courts of first instance rule in the first and second instance. If the parties concerned do not agree with a decision, they can take their case to the Federal Supreme Court. The Federal Supreme Court Act regulates the conditions under which an appeal is possible.

Election of judges

The judges of the federal courts are elected by the United Federal Assembly for a term of office of 6 years. Re-election is possible without restriction. At the latest, judges leave office at the end of their 68th year of age.

The United Federal Assembly also elects the presidents and vicepresidents of the courts. The presidential term of office is 2 years (with the exception of the Federal Patent Court: 6 years). A one-time re-election is possible.

Procedures in the Swiss legal system



The federal courts are located at four sites



In 2022 approximately 14 000 cases were concluded



The Federal Supreme Court

The Federal Supreme Court is the highest instance for legal disputes between citizens, between citizens and the state, between cantons and between the federal government and the cantons. These disputes may concern matters of civil, criminal, administrative and social law.

www.bger.ch

Functions

In general, it definitively examines decisions of lower courts

As the highest judicial authority, the Federal Supreme Court rules on appeals against decisions of the highest cantonal courts, the Federal Criminal Court, the Federal Administrative Court and the Federal Patent Court. It examines whether they have applied the law correctly. In the case of human rights issues, an appeal can be lodged at the European Court of Human Rights.

It ensures uniform application of the law

Through its decisions, the Federal Supreme Court ensures uniform application of federal law. It protects the constitutional rights of citizens. The other courts and the administrative authorities align themselves with its decisions.

It contributes to the development of law

If the Federal Supreme Court has to rule on a legal question that is not or not clearly regulated by the law, it contributes to the development of the law through its case law. This can lead to Parliament reformulating a law.

Organisation

The Federal Supreme Court is divided according to legal areas. It comprises eight divisions:

- two public law divisions in Lausanne (e.g. political rights, law on foreign nationals)
- two public law divisions in Lucerne (e.g. taxes, accident and invalidity insurance)
- two civil law divisions in Lausanne (e.g. contract law, family law)
- two criminal law divisions in Lausanne

40 ordinary and 19 substitute judges work at the Federal Supreme Court. They are assisted by 350 other employees (including around 150 court clerks).

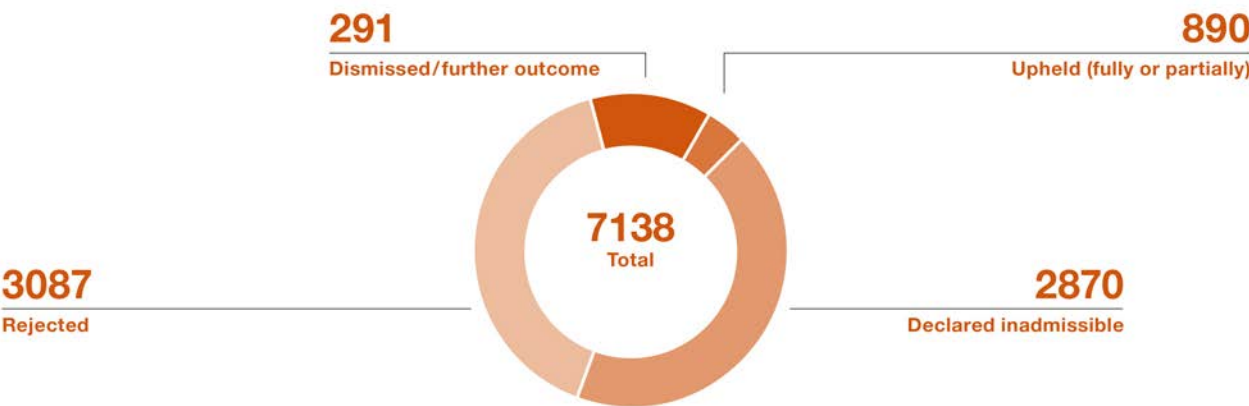
The Federal Supreme Court is represented externally by its president. The whole court (all 40 federal judges) decides on the most important questions. The seat of the Federal Supreme Court is in Lausanne. For historical reasons, two divisions are located in Lucerne.

President: Yves Donzallaz

Scheduled dates for public hearings

www.bger.ch > Rechtsprechung > Sitzungen (in German)

Outcome and number of cases 2022





“There is no democracy without an independent judiciary and no judiciary without independent judges.”

Yves Donzallaz
President of the Federal Supreme Court 2023/2024

Particularities

Usually in writing

The proceedings before the Federal Supreme Court are generally in writing. The competent judge studies the case and submits a written draft decision to the other judges involved in the case. If all the judges agree, the decision is issued. If they do not all agree, a public hearing is scheduled.

Transparent

During a public hearing, the judges discuss the case, often in the presence of the parties to the dispute, media representatives or visitors. At the end, the judges vote by show of hands. All judgments of the Federal Supreme Court are published on the Internet. Video recordings of public hearings are published when they are of particular interest to the public.

No independent examination of the facts of the case

The Federal Supreme Court examines legal issues. In principle, it bases its findings on the facts as they were established by the lower courts.

Multilingual – three or five judges

The judges of the Federal Supreme Court come from all linguistic regions of Switzerland. During public hearings, they speak in their mother tongues. The decisions are written either in German, French or Italian and are not translated. As a rule, three judges decide on a case and five when the case raises legal questions of fundamental importance or if one of the judges so requests.

Three questions to the president of the Federal Supreme Court

Has digitalisation also found its way into the Federal Supreme Court?

Digitalisation is well advanced at the Federal Supreme Court. The files on the more than 7,000 court proceedings that take place every year are now also managed electronically. In the morning, the mail is scanned. Later, the documents can be accessed electronically on the screen. However, the file with the paper documents still exists. The Federal Supreme Court is also participating in the nationwide “Justitia 4.0” project to digitise the Swiss justice system.

Does artificial intelligence (AI) play a role in the judiciary?

At the Federal Supreme Court, AI-based software developed in-house has been in use since 2021 to anonymise judgments before they are published on the internet. The AI application makes suggestions as to which names and references to a person's identity should be replaced by ‘A.’ ‘B.’ or ‘C.’. The hit rate is over 90 per cent. The rest and the control of the AI suggestions is done by humans.

Is the Federal Supreme Court close to the citizens?

Yes. First of all, there is very broad access to the Federal Supreme Court for citizens. Only in rare exceptional cases is an appeal to the highest court not possible. Moreover, the Federal Supreme Court does not want to be an ivory tower; on our 2023 open days to mark the 175th anniversary of the Federal Constitution, we had many great discussions with visitors. And we are already very much looking forward to a lively and enriching exchange at the 150th anniversary of the Federal Supreme Court in 2025!

The president of the Federal Supreme Court is elected by Parliament for a term of two years. He represents the Federal Supreme Court vis-à-vis the outside world.



Publication of
decisions



Film sequences
of public hearings

The Federal Criminal Court

The Federal Criminal Court is the court of first instance and of appeal for criminal cases of particular interest to the Swiss Confederation. It also decides on appeals against the Office of the Attorney General or other prosecution and legal assistance authorities, as well as on conflicts of jurisdiction between cantons or the Confederation and the cantons.

www.bstger.ch

Functions

Most criminal offences are judged by cantonal courts. The Federal Criminal Court rules on criminal cases of particular interest to the Confederation, including criminal offences committed by or against federal employees, offences involving explosives, counterfeiting, cross-border economic crime, organised crime, corruption and money laundering as well as aviation offences.

The Federal Criminal Court reviews orders issued by federal prosecution authorities and authorities providing international mutual assistance in criminal matters. It also rules on conflicts of jurisdiction between prosecution authorities.

Organisation

The Federal Criminal Court consists of a Criminal Chamber and a Lower and Higher Appeals Chamber. Criminal Chamber judgments can be subject to appeal before the Higher Appeals Chamber. The latter was only established in 2019. Most of the Lower and Higher Appeals Chamber judgments can be referred to the Federal Supreme Court.

The Court has 22 tenured and 13 part-time judges. Some 77 employees support them. The Federal Criminal Court's management bodies are the Administrative Commission and the Plenary Assembly (consisting of all tenured judges).

President: Alberto Fabbri

Particularities

Large procedures

Proceedings before the Federal Criminal Court may involve several individuals and be multilingual, making translations necessary. At times special security measures have to be taken for the hearings. The written judgment in major proceedings involving several parties is often well over 100 pages long.

International context

Criminal cases often have an international dimension, especially those concerning economic crime and terrorism. The Lower Appeals Chamber can be required to decide whether Switzerland should extradite a person to another state, or if evidence (mostly bank records) should be handed over to another state.

Criminal Chamber: cases by subject matter in 2022

5 Money laundering

4 Administrative criminal cases

3 Criminal organisation

3 Subsequent decisions (e.g. conversion of a monetary penalty into imprisonment)

41 Other offences (e.g. counterfeiting of currency, explosives offences, aviation offences)

The Federal Administrative Court

The Federal Administrative Court handles appeals against rulings made by federal administrative authorities. In certain areas, it also reviews decisions made by cantonal authorities.

www.bvger.ch @BVGer_Schweiz

Functions

The Federal Administrative Court decides on appeals concerning the legality of rulings made by the federal administrative authorities. It therefore deals with a broad spectrum of legal issues ranging from A for asylum to Z for zoning law. The court also examines appeals against certain decisions made by cantonal governments, such as those concerning hospital lists. Lastly, it rules in the first instance on legal actions instituted in specific areas, e.g. in cases involving public law contracts.

Organisation

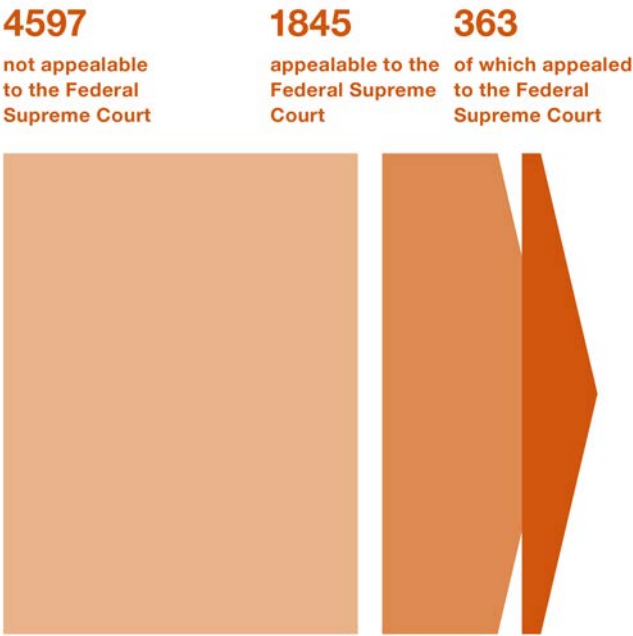
The Federal Administrative Court, which is based in St. Gallen, comprises six divisions and the General Secretariat. Division I focuses on infrastructure, taxes, federal employment and data protection; Division II on economic affairs, competition and education; Division III on social insurance and public health; Divisions IV and V on asylum law; and Division VI on the law on foreign nationals and citizenship.

The judges are elected by the United Federal Assembly. They perform their duties independently and are bound only by the law.

With 73 judges and 375 employees, the Federal Administrative Court is Switzerland's largest federal court.

President: Vito Valenti

6442 cases concluded in 2022



Particularities

Own inquiries

In hearing legal disputes, the Federal Administrative Court does not rely solely on the facts established in the lower instance and on the parties' submissions, it establishes the material facts. For this purpose, it calls on experts to deliver opinions and in certain cases makes preparatory inquiries or visual inspections.

Largely final

Each year, the court issues an average of 6,500 decisions – mostly in writing – in German, French and Italian. Most of its judgments are final.

The Federal Patent Court

The Federal Patent Court decides on disputes relating to patents. The smallest of the federal courts, it regularly deals with international parties. If the parties agree, pleadings and briefs can be in English.
www.bundespatentgericht.ch/en

Functions

Developing a technical idea usually costs a lot of money. With a patent, the ‘intellectual property’ of an invention is legally protected. In the event of a dispute, the Federal Patent Court decides whether a new technical development meets the requirements for patent protection; it also assesses whether existing patent rights are being infringed. It must also decide who is the legal holder of a patent or how a patent may be used in the context of licensing.

Until 2012, the cantonal courts had jurisdiction in matters relating to patent disputes. Since then, these cases have been a matter for the Federal Patent Court. Its judgments may be appealed to the Federal Supreme Court.

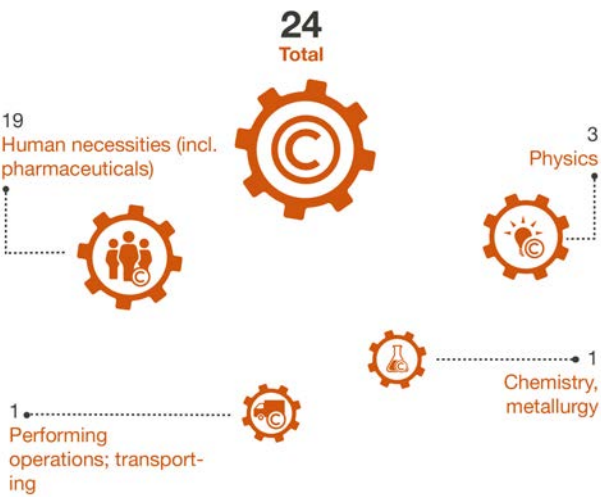
Organisation

The Federal Patent Court is the smallest federal court. It is not split into different divisions. 42 non-permanent judges work for the court but they do not have their own offices in the court. The president of the Federal Patent Court, another judge, two court clerks and two office staff members work for the Federal Patent Court on a permanent basis.

The seat of the Federal Patent Court is in St. Gallen. It does not have its own courtroom. If court hearings take place, they are held in the building of the nearby Federal Administrative Court. The Federal Patent Court can also hear cases in the cantons, e.g. in Neuchâtel, if the parties come from French-speaking Switzerland.

President: Mark Schweizer

Cases by technical field received in 2022



Particularities

English is also permitted as a language

International parties frequently appear before the Federal Patent Court; English is also often used in the field of technology. The parties to the dispute may therefore also conduct proceedings in English if everyone agrees.

Judges with technical expertise

The Federal Patent Court regularly deals with complex technical issues in its proceedings. Judges with appropriate technical expertise are therefore involved, enabling fast and cost-effective proceedings, as time-consuming and costly opinions from external experts can usually be avoided.

Judgments delivered by the federal courts

Initiative for free public transport invalid

According to a popular initiative submitted in 2020 in the canton of Fribourg, a guarantee for free public transport should be included in the cantonal constitution. The cantonal parliament declared the initiative invalid. Rightly so, ruled the Federal Supreme Court. The initiative is not compatible with the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that the costs of public transport must be covered to a reasonable extent by the fares paid by users.

BGE 149 I 182

Singles not discriminated against by TV licence fee

A man living alone had claimed that single people were discriminated against by the licence fee for radio and television reception compared to households with more than one person. The Federal Supreme Court rejected his appeal. Parliament explicitly opted for the model of a fee per household. It rejected other collection models. The law itself and the will of the legislator are therefore clear and binding for the Federal Supreme Court. Discrimination against single people is not apparent.

Judgment 2C_547/2022

The Office of the Attorney General has jurisdiction

A man was arrested while leaving the country for Italy in possession of 170,000 francs in cash. He declared he was collecting money as a member of an independent group in Europe for the purchase of war material for Ukraine. There were found minor traces of drugs on the money. The Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland refused to take over the criminal proceedings from the Canton of Ticino prosecutor's office. The Lower Appeals Chamber

of the Federal Criminal Court ruled that the Office of the Attorney General had the jurisdiction in the present case. In the first place, there could be a violation of the War Material Act, which falls under the jurisdiction of federal authorities and not of the cantons.

Decree BG.2023.18

Standard of proof for shooting a wolf

The Federal Office for the Environment relied solely on genetic DNA samples taken from killed farm animals when considering requests to eliminate an alpha wolf of a pack. The Canton of Graubünden considered this practice too restrictive. The Federal Administrative Court granted the appeal and authorised the cantons to submit other evidence to establish the destructive behaviour of the specific parent animal.

Judgment A-5142/2021

Fine against cartels

A company filed an appeal maintaining that the cartel fine imposed on it was too high given its participation in the leniency programme after its voluntary reporting. The Federal Administrative Court dismissed the appeal and clarified new questions relating to this programme. The Court notably specified that the decisive factor justifying the leniency programme was the objective added value of the company's contribution towards establishing the facts.

Judgment B-645/2018

The technology behind emojis

Pear AG, a Swiss company, filed a patent infringement action against Apple Inc. At issue was the technology for transmitting emojis in text messages. Under the patented technology, the selected emoji is not sent as a graphic but as a string of characters which the receiving mobile phone uses to find and display the corresponding representation in its memory. The Federal Patent Court dismissed the action. All the patents in question are invalid.

Decision O2020_014

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Sina Guntern (p. 46, 50, 51)
Parliamentary Services (p. 35, 44)
DDPS (p. 53)
Federal Supreme Court (p. 77)

Historic photos on pages 10/11 (chronological)
Old Confederation: State Archive Schwyz
Helvetic Republic: Swiss National Museum (SNM)
Mediation: SNM
Federal Treaty: Swiss Federal Archives/Wikimedia Commons
Sonderbund War: SNM
Federal Constitution: SNM
Expanded democracy: Wikimedia Commons
First World War, General Strike: SNM
Proportional representation: Wikimedia Commons
Second World War: Hans Tomamichel/SNM
Equal opportunities: SNM
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The River Aare meanders its way through Bern. It is overlooked by the Federal Palace, the heart of Swiss political life.

