



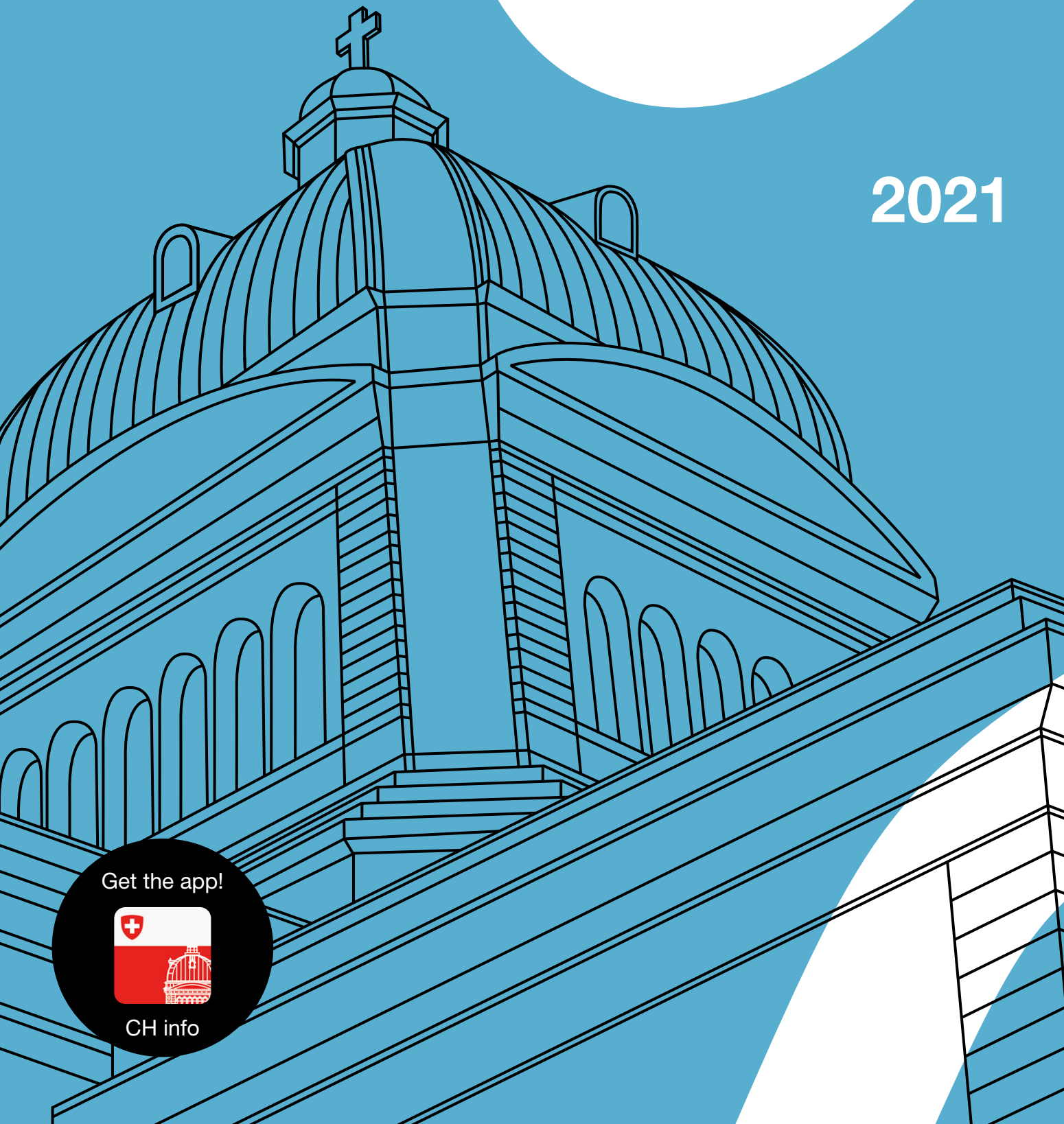
Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft  
Confédération suisse  
Confederazione Svizzera  
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Confederation

Federal Chancellery FCh

# The Swiss Confederation a brief guide

2021



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**“Democratic procedures take longer, but provide more stability and engender greater acceptance in the long term.”**

Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr

Dear Reader

Political developments in recent years show that not every country has to remain democratic just because it once was. In fact, democratic processes are increasingly being called into question because they allegedly produce ‘the wrong outcome’. Reference is made to lower COVID-19 case numbers in authoritarian states or to higher economic growth rates. Some peevishly ask whether the urgent problems of today can ever be resolved through lengthy democratic procedures and compromises.

Those who argue in this way have not understood the essence of democracy. There are countries where the government controls the people. And there are countries where the people control the government. Democracies fall under the second category.

It is true that even authoritarian regimes sometimes make decisions that are supported by the majority. But there are no rules defining how the majority can overturn decisions if they no longer agree with them. Democratic procedures take longer, but over the years, they provide more stability and engender greater acceptance.

Those who want to preserve democracy respect the institutions, the independence of the courts, the competences of the different powers and the fundamental values of the constitution.

If you would like to gain a better understanding of Switzerland’s style of democracy, you will gain an initial overview by browsing through this copy of ‘The Swiss Confederation – a brief guide’. And if you want to defend it, exercise your right to vote and stand for election!

Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr



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### **Complementary resources to accompany the brochure:**

- CH info app for smartphones and tablets
- Teaching material
- Barrier-free PDF for the visually impaired



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**Switzerland**

**On 1 August, Switzerland celebrates its National Day. Beacon fires are lit around the country that can be seen for miles around.**

**The people of Switzerland get the day off thanks to a popular initiative from 1993 'for a national holiday on 1 August', adopted after 84 % of voters came out in favour.**

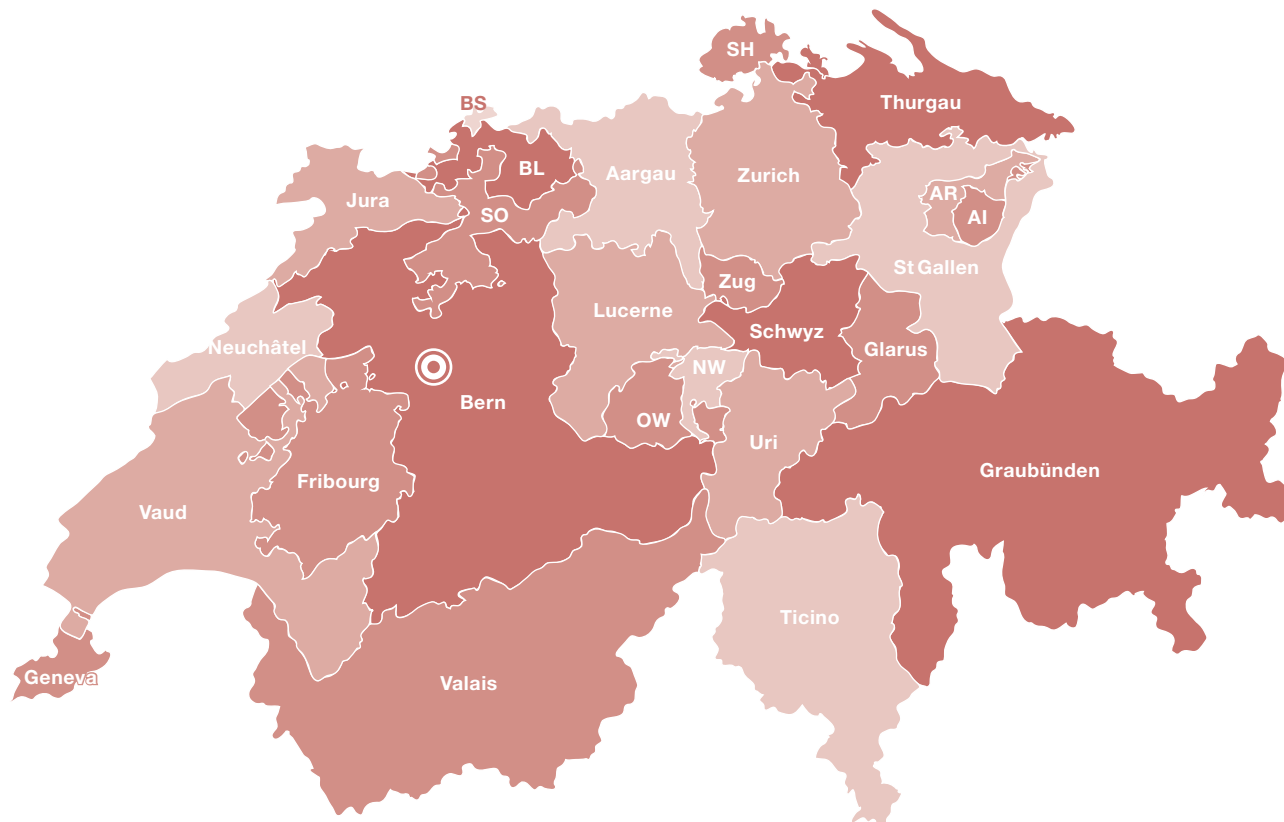




# Switzerland

Switzerland is a small country with a population of 8.6 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



[www.statistik.ch](http://www.statistik.ch)

AI	Appenzel Innerrhoden	NW	Nidwalden
AR	Appenzel Ausserrhoden	OW	Obwalden
BL	Basel-Landschaft	SH	Schaffhausen
BS	Basel-Stadt	SO	Solothurn



## 8.6 million people

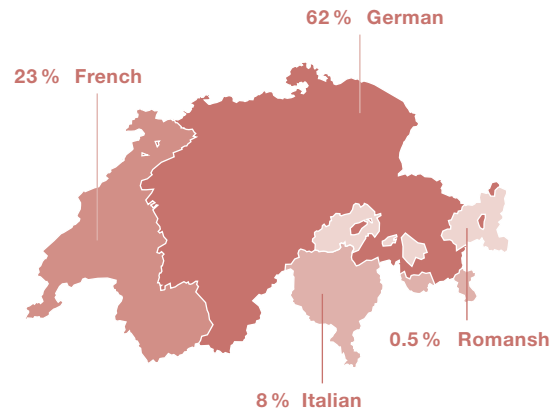
There are 8.6 million people living in Switzerland, a quarter of them without a Swiss passport. More than half of these foreign nationals were either born in Switzerland or have been living here for at least ten years. The majority of the foreign population comes from an EU country. The largest foreign national groups are from Italy (15%), Germany (14%) and Portugal (12%).



Non-Swiss citizens 2 175 000

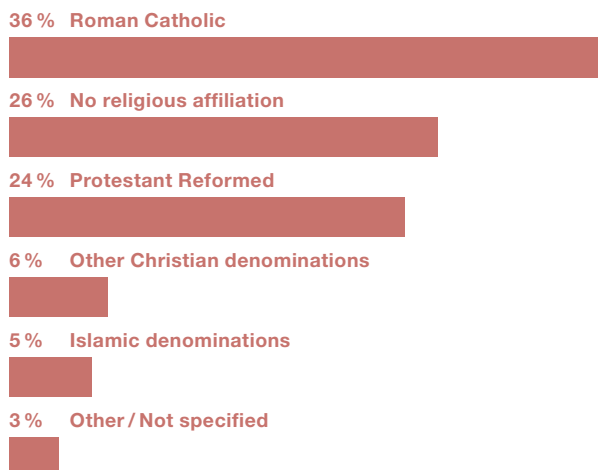
## 4 national languages

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 25 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.



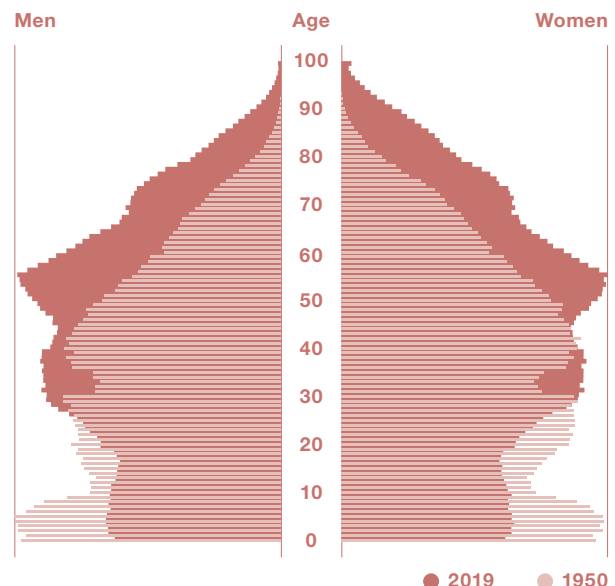
## Christian majority

66 per cent of people living in Switzerland claim affiliation to the Christian faith. 26% state that they have no religious affiliation; this number has been on the rise for several years. The religious landscape is changing: the two main Christian denominations, Protestants and Catholics, are declining. In 1970, 96% of the population was affiliated to Christian denominations (49% Protestant, 47% Catholic).



## 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 86 years for women. Women have 1.5 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 (CVP/Die Mitte 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.



## Confederation

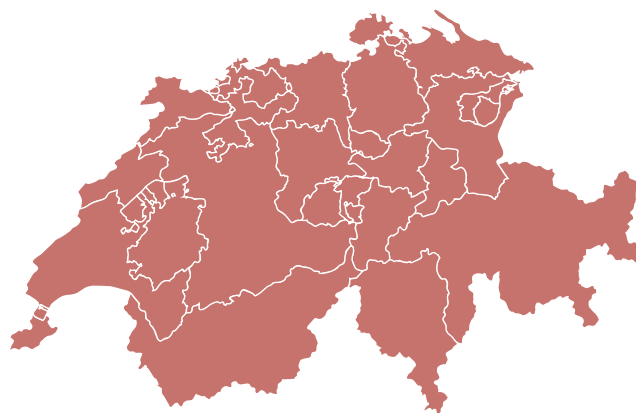
The Federal Constitution defines the Confederation's tasks and responsibilities. These include Switzerland's relations with the outside world, defence, the national road network, and nuclear energy. Switzerland's Parliament, the Federal Assembly, is made up of the National Council and the Council of 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 per cent of the population lives in urban areas.

Proceeds from direct federal tax account for 31 per cent of the Confederation's total revenues.

26

The Confederation is made up of 26 cantons. Each canton has its own parliament, government, courts and constitution.



## Cantons

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 healthcare, cultural affairs and police matters. Each canton levies its own cantonal taxes.

In the national fiscal equalisation plan, the Confederation and 7 cantons are net contributors and 19 cantons are net beneficiaries.

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

# 2172

The 26 cantons are divided into 2172 communes. Each canton determines how it allocates responsibilities between itself and the communes.



### Communes

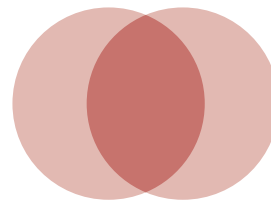
The responsibilities of the communes include local planning, running schools, social welfare and the fire service. Larger communes and cities have their own parliaments, and organise their own referendums. In smaller communes, decisions are made by the citizens at communal assemblies. Each commune levies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

The smallest commune (Kammersrohr, SO) has a population of 28, the largest approximately 415,000 (City of Zurich).

In four out of five communes, eligible voters decide on political issues at communal assemblies.

### Communes

An average of approximately 30 communes merge every year, thereby reducing the total number of communes.



### Confederation

11 per cent of all Swiss citizens live outside Switzerland (the 'Swiss Abroad').

# 11%



### Cantons

Gross domestic product per capita in the canton of Basel-Stadt is approximately three times higher than in the canton of Uri.



Canton of Uri



Canton of Basel-Stadt

Video 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 around 20 major bilateral agreements primarily concluded in two packages:

**The first series of bilateral agreements** largely governs economic matters. The main aim is to facilitate market access for both sides (goods, services, labour). In 2000, the package was approved by 67% of Swiss voters. They consist of 7 agreements. If one of these agreements is terminated by Switzerland or the EU, the other 6 agreements automatically cease to apply ('guillotine clause').

**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 (formerly ECSC, EEC)

#### International Geneva

Many international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are based in Geneva. Around 32,000 international officials work there. International conferences and gatherings are held there all the time.

### 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 is dedicated to protecting human rights, the rule of law and democracy. Its most important agreement is the European Convention on Human Rights. Human rights violations can be brought before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

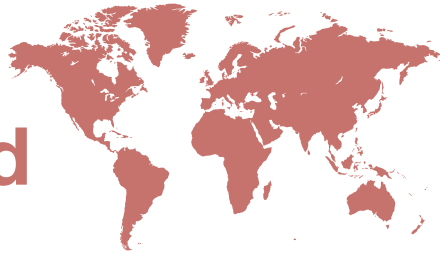
47 member states  
Headquarters in Strasbourg  
Founded in 1949, Switzerland a member since 1963

#### Neutrality

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

**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.**

## World



### Memberships

#### United Nations UN

All 193 states of the world belong to the UN. It is committed to promoting peace and worldwide cooperation in solving global problems. The principles of the UN are laid down in the Charter of the United Nations. Switzerland has been a member of the UN since 2002: In a referendum, accession was accepted by 55 % of Swiss voters.

193 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 Cooperation in Europe, with its participating states in North America, Europe and Asia, is the world's largest regional security organisation. It takes measures to promote peace and resolve conflicts. It mediates between parties involved in conflict and supports the reconstruction of political structures.

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.

193 member states

Headquarters in Paris

Founded in 1945, Switzerland a member since 1949

#### WTO

The World Trade Organization promotes and regulates global trade in goods and services. The aim of the WTO agreements is to ensure that trade is as free, unhindered and non-discriminatory as possible. 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.

37 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.

30 members

Headquarters in Brussels

Founded in 1949

**Direct democracy**

2021 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Swiss women obtaining the right to vote and be elected at federal level. And it is 40 years since gender equality was enshrined in the Federal Constitution.

At the women's strike in 2019, hundreds of thousands took to the streets to demand equal pay, better work-life balance and an end to sexism.







# 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 45 % 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 Confederation and the cantons now have more than 15 years of experience with e-voting. Currently, however, e-voting has been suspended. The rules on e-voting are being revised for the next trial phase in order to increase system stability using fully verifiable systems.

## People's assemblies (Landsgemeinden)

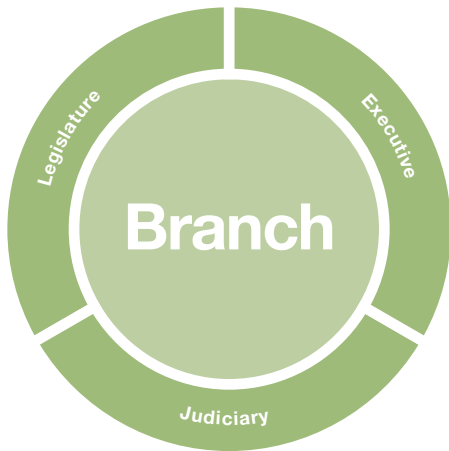
In the cantons of Glarus and Appenzell Innerrhoden, several thousand voters gather outdoors once a year to vote in a people's assembly (Landsgemeinde). They vote to elect their representatives and to decide on proposals that affect their canton. The people's assembly is an ancient form of Swiss democracy.



[www.ch.ch/democracy](http://www.ch.ch/democracy)

## 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

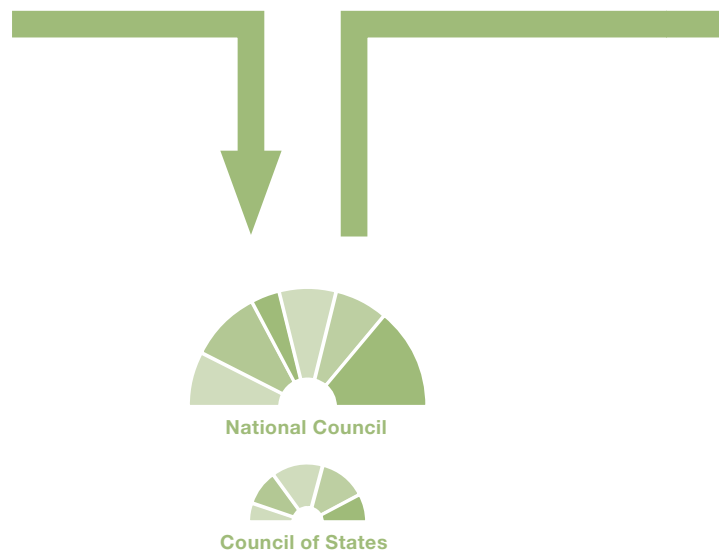
## The Swiss people



• = 10,000 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 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.)

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.

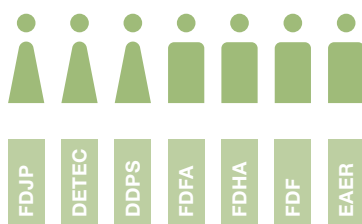


**Parliament elects the government (the executive):**  
The seven members of the Federal Council and the Federal Chancellor.



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

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](http://www.attorneygeneral.ch)



## The executive The government

### 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 Councilor heads a department. The seven departments and the Federal Chancellery make up the Federal Administration. (→ p. 48ff.)

## 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. (→ 74ff.)

# Votes

The electorate decides on political issues up to four times a year. Votes are held on popular initiatives and on certain parliamentary decisions, in most cases having to do with constitutional or legislative amendments.

## Changing the Constitution

In Switzerland, every amendment to the Constitution must be put to a vote (**mandatory referendum**) – whether the proposed amendment was passed by Parliament or put forward by popular initiative.

For a new constitutional article to come into force, the consent of a majority of the People (popular majority) and the cantons (majority of the cantons) is needed (**double majority**). A popular vote is also ‘mandatory’ for Switzerland to join an organisation for collective security or a supranational community (e.g. the UN or the EU). Switzerland can only join such an organisation or community if a double majority is achieved.

Swiss citizens aged 18 and over are eligible to vote and may cast their ballots in federal votes.

## Putting a stop to a new law

If Parliament passes a new law or approves an international treaty, those eligible to vote may request a referendum against it (**optional referendum**).

If they are successful, a referendum is held in which the law or treaty in question is put to a vote. A majority of voters must approve the law or referendum for it to come into force (**simple majority**).

### 2021 voting dates

Votes are scheduled to take place on the following Sundays in 2021:

7 March, 13 June,  
26 September and  
28 November

### Information

- Explanatory pamphlets are sent by post to eligible voters
- ‘VoteInfo’ app
- [www.admin.ch](http://www.admin.ch)
- [www.ch.ch/en/demokratie](http://www.ch.ch/en/demokratie)
- Explanatory videos

## Instruments of direct democracy

### Popular initiative

Anyone who has the right to vote in Switzerland can launch or sign a popular initiative to amend the Constitution. For a vote to be held on a popular initiative, 100,000 valid signatures must be collected within a period of 18 months.

Popular initiatives were introduced at federal level in 1891. 220 have been voted on since then. 22 have been accepted.

As of 31 December 2020, 11 initiatives were at the signature-gathering stage, 15 were pending before the Federal Council or Parliament, and 3 were ready to be put to a vote.

### Optional referendum

To bring a decision made by Parliament to a vote (e.g. to stop a new law from passing), anyone who has the right to vote can launch an optional referendum. To do so, they must collect 50,000 valid signatures within 100 days. An optional referendum is also held upon request by eight cantons (‘referendum requested by the cantons’).

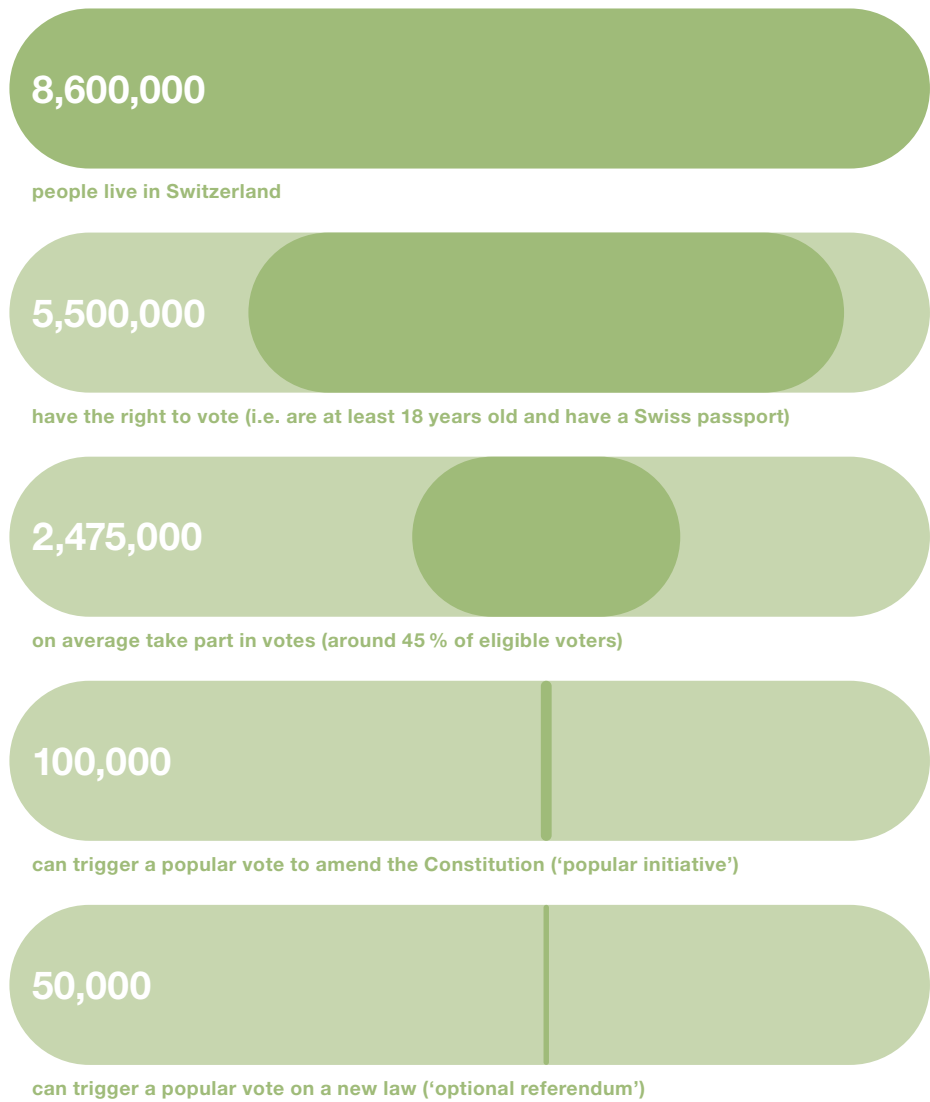
The optional referendum was introduced in 1874. 196 have been held since then; 82 of the proposals were rejected by voters.

As of 31 December 2020, the referendum period was running for 45 federal acts and decrees. Signatures were being gathered for a vote on 4 proposals.



YouTube videos on proposals submitted to the vote of the People

**Number of people entitled to play a part in political life as a proportion of the overall population**



**Effects of initiatives and referendums**

Even if most initiatives fail and only very few laws are stopped by a referendum, these two instruments can still have a major impact:

- They lead to public discussions on the topics they involve.
- They can influence legislation: groups that are likely to launch a referendum are taken into consideration in the drafting of new laws (→ page 42/43).
- The Federal Council and Parliament will sometimes make counter-proposals to initiatives, to address the initiative's concerns in a different way.

**Votes held in 2020**

**29 November**

Federal Popular Initiative 'For responsible businesses – protecting human rights and the environment' (Responsible Business Initiative).

**no (accepted by 50.7% of the People, but rejected by the cantons)**

Federal Popular Initiative 'For a ban on financing war material manufacturers'.

**57.5% no**

**27 September**

Federal Popular Initiative 'For moderate immigration' (Limitation Initiative).

**61.7% no**

Amendment to the Federal Act on the Hunting and Protection of Wild Mammals and Birds (Hunting Act).

**51.9% no**

Amendment to the Federal Act on Direct Federal Taxation (child deductions).

**63.2% no**

Amendment to the Federal Act on Compensation for Loss of Earnings for Persons on Military Service or Maternity Leave (paternity leave).

**60.3% yes**

Federal Decree on the Procurement of new Fighter Aircraft.

**50.1% yes**

**17 May**

In a historic decision, this vote was cancelled by the Federal Council because of the coronavirus pandemic. Only two other votes have been cancelled since Switzerland became a federal state in 1848: once in 1920 and again in 1951, because of foot-and-mouth disease.

**9 February**

Federal Popular Initiative for 'More affordable homes'.

**57.1% no**

Amendments to the Swiss Criminal Code and the Military Criminal Code (ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation).

**63.1% yes**

# 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.

### Election guide

An election guide explains how to complete and return the official ballot papers correctly in cantons with more than one seat in the National Council. Every voter is sent the guide, which is also available online.

### Dates

The most recent federal elections were held on 20 October 2019. The next elections to the National Council and (in most cantons) the Council of States will be held on **22 October 2023**

## 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'), which is always held in the April before the elections to the National Council. In the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel, a system of proportional representation is used, while in the other cantons the simple majority system applies. Swiss citizens living abroad are only eligible to vote in certain cantons.



Youtube –  
Who has the right  
to vote?



Youtube –  
How do you  
vote?  
(in German)



Election guide  
Elections to the  
National Council  
(in German)



www.ch.ch/  
elections 2019



## 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 (e.g. 'The Centre', previously the CVP) will cooperate with either left or right-wing parties.

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

### Elections are decisive

Even in Switzerland most issues are decided by Parliament or the government. However, between the elections in 2015 and 2019, the electorate was called on to vote on 33 specific proposals. In the same period, Parliament passed 464 laws, including 134 federal acts and 94 federal decrees. It also elected the government, the members of the federal courts and the Attorney General.

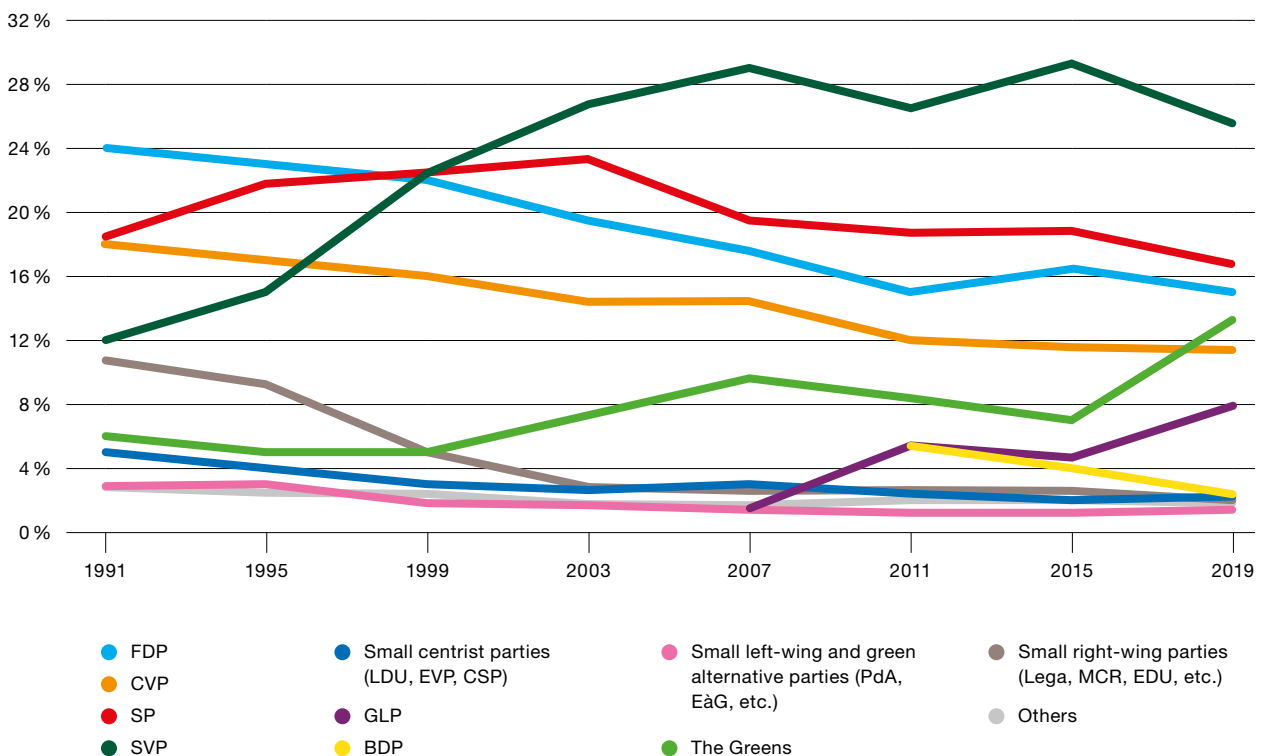
#### What does 'left-wing' mean?

- 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 2019)




# 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. In the 2019–2023 legislature period, eleven political parties are represented in the National Council. Five of those are also represented in the Council of States, four in the Federal Council.

At the 2019 federal elections, the two ecological parties made the largest gains: The Greens won an additional 17 seats and the glp 9 seats. Although the SVP lost the most seats – 12 in all – it remains the strongest party in the National Council. The other parties represented in the Federal Council also lost seats: the SP and FDP both lost 4 seats, while the CVP lost 2 seats.

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

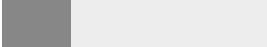


**SVP – Swiss People's Party**




Party President  
**Marco Chiesa**

Share of the vote\* **25.6 %**




Federal Council	<b>2</b>
National Council	<b>53</b>
Council of States	<b>6</b>

[www.svp.ch](http://www.svp.ch)

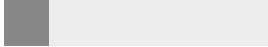


**SP – Swiss Social Democratic Party**




Co-Presidents  
**Mattea Meyer**  
**Cédric Wermuth**

Share of the vote\* **16.8 %**




Federal Council	<b>2</b>
National Council	<b>39</b>
Council of States	<b>9</b>

[www.sp.ch](http://www.sp.ch)

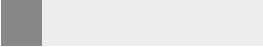


**FDP – FDP.The Liberals**




Party President  
**Petra Gössi**

Share of the vote\* **15.1 %**




Federal Council	<b>2</b>
National Council	<b>29</b>
Council of States	<b>12</b>

[www.fdp.ch](http://www.fdp.ch)

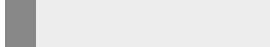


**The Centre\*\***



Party President  
**Gerhard Pfister**

Share of the vote\* **13.8 %\*\***



Federal Council	<b>1</b>
National Council	<b>28**</b>
Council of States	<b>13</b>

[www.die-mitte.ch](http://www.die-mitte.ch)

\* Share of the vote at the 2019 parliamentary elections ('party strength')

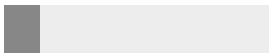


## The Greens – Swiss Green Party



Party President  
**Balthasar Glättli**

Share of the vote\* **13.2%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>28</b>
Council of States	<b>5</b>

[www.gruene.ch](http://www.gruene.ch)

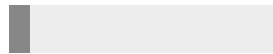


## glp – Swiss Green Liberal Party



Party President  
**Jürg Grossen**

Share of the vote\* **7.8%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>16</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.gruenliberale.ch](http://www.gruenliberale.ch)

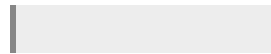


## EVP – Swiss Evangelical People's Party



Party President  
**Marianne Streiff-Feller**

Share of the vote\* **2.1%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>3</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.evppev.ch](http://www.evppev.ch)

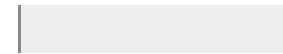


## EDU – Federal Democratic Union



Party President  
**Daniel Frischknecht**

Share of the vote\* **1.0%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>1</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.edu-schweiz.ch](http://www.edu-schweiz.ch)

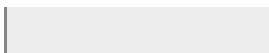


## LdT – Lega dei Ticinesi



Party President  
**vacant**

Share of the vote\* **0.8%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>1</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.lega-dei-ticinesi.ch](http://www.lega-dei-ticinesi.ch)

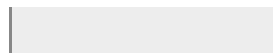


## PdA – Swiss Workers' Party



Party President  
**Gavriel Pinson**

Share of the vote\* **0.8%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>1</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.pda.ch](http://www.pda.ch)

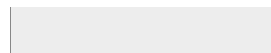


## EàG Ensemble à Gauche



Party President  
**Pierre Vanek**

Share of the vote\* **0.3%**



Federal Council	<b>0</b>
National Council	<b>1</b>
Council of States	<b>0</b>

[www.eag-ge.ch](http://www.eag-ge.ch)

\*\* Following the merger of the CVP and the BDP, the new party will be known as 'The Centre' from 1.1.2021. At the 2019 elections, the parties achieved the following results:

<b>Share of the vote</b>	
CVP	11.4 %
BDP	2.4 %
<b>No. of National Council seats</b>	
CVP	25
BDP	3

One of the 46 members of the Council of States does not belong to a political party.

The Legislature **Parliament**

At the beginning of September 2020, plastic screens were put up around the desks in the National Council chamber to protect against COVID-19.

The screens, which can be dismantled (once the pandemic is over), have also been installed in the Council of States chamber and in various conference rooms in the Parliament Building.





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# The Legislature

# Parliament

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**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](http://www.parliament.ch)



Video about Parliament – ‘Erklär mir das Parlament’ (in German)

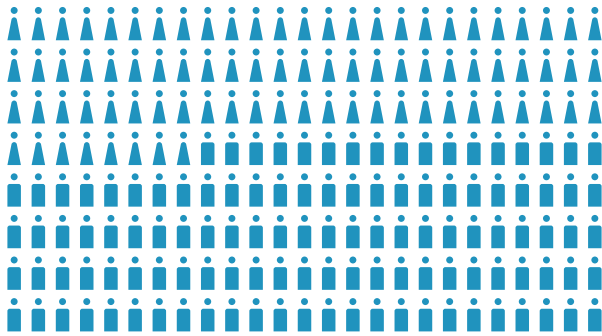
## **The home of Swiss political life**

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 and 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

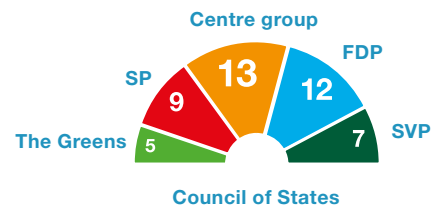
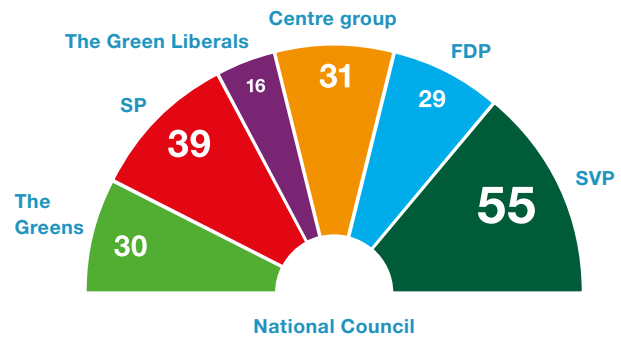


200 members of the National Council

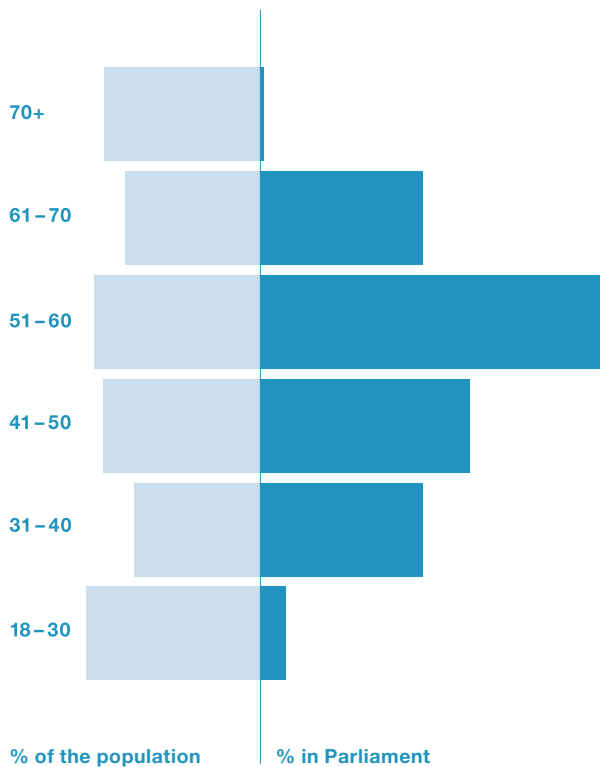


46 members of the Council of States

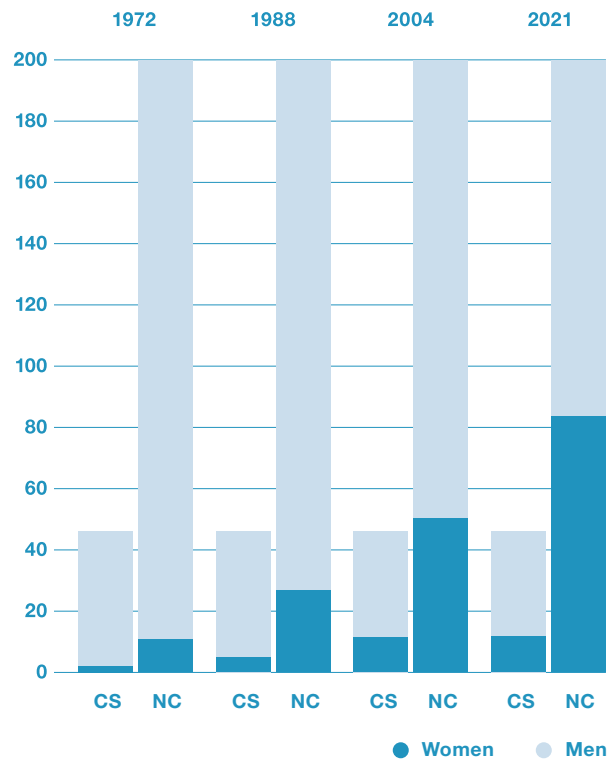
## Strength of parliamentary groups



## 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.

**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

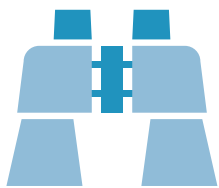
The National Council and the Council of States come together for elections to form the United Federal Assembly, which elects the members of the federal government and the federal courts and, if necessary, appoints a general. During the winter session, it elects one member of the Federal Council as president 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, and the Attorney General of Switzerland.

### 2019 Federal Council elections

During the last Federal Council elections in December 2019, Parliament – meeting as the United Federal Assembly – re-elected all the members of the Federal Council. After gaining over 10 % of the votes for the first time in the October 2019 parliamentary elections, the Green Party was able to put its own candidate on the ballot. The Green Party ran against the FDP, however the FDP federal councillors Karin Keller-Sutter and Ignazio Cassis were able to hold on to their seats after being re-elected by an absolute majority. The newly elected Federal Council therefore remained unchanged (→ p. 50).



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

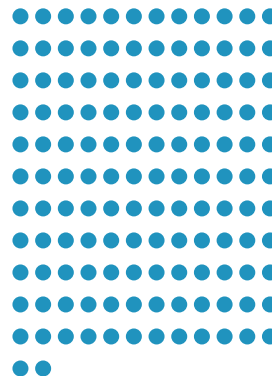
Parliament has sovereignty over federal finances: it determines the budget for the following year, takes note of the Federal Council's budget and approves the state accounts of the previous year. Parliament votes on the budget during the winter session. The items of business move quickly from one chamber 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

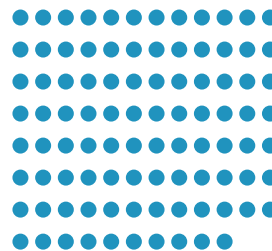
Legislative provisions are enacted in the form of federal acts and ordinances. The remaining decrees are 'federal decrees'. Referendums are required only for a small number of federal acts. Simple federal decrees and ordinances cannot be stopped by a referendum.

**In the 50<sup>th</sup> legislature period (2015–2019) Parliament enacted 464 decrees:**

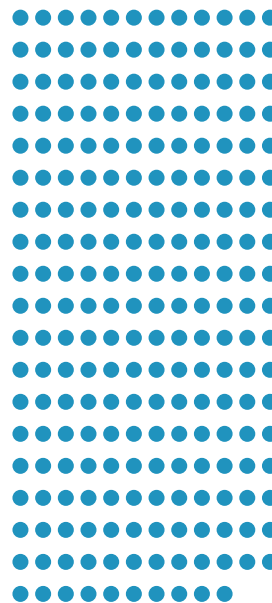
134 federal acts



94 federal decrees



226 simple federal decrees



10 ordinances



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

# 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 42,000 people. The National Council is also known as the 'large chamber' or the 'people's chamber'.

### President of the National Council for 2021

Every year, a different member acts as president of the National Council. Andreas Aebi (SVP) will preside over the National Council in 2021. 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 in **October 2023**.



Video of 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 Auser rhoden and Appenzell Inner rhoden, 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 2021

Every year a different member acts as president of the Council of States. Alex Kuprecht (SVP) will preside over the Council of States in 2021. 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 2023**.



## 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 2021

Spring session:

**1 – 19 March**

Summer session:

**31 May – 18 June**

Autumn session:

**13 September – 1 October**

Winter session:

**29 November – 17 December**

Special session (if required):

**3 – 6 May**

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

**29 November**

Election of the President of the Swiss Confederation and the vice president of the Federal Council:

**8 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](http://www.parliament.ch)



**President of the National Council 2020/21**

Andreas Aebi, Bern  
Swiss People's Party

### What priorities have you set for your year as president?

My aim is promote cohesion, confidence and a zest for life. In times of crisis such as these, there needs to be solidarity between young and old, between the country's different regions, and between people working in different sectors, as not everyone has been affected by the pandemic to the same extent.

### Alongside your work as a member of parliament, you are also a farmer, auctioneer and tour operator. How do you manage to fit it all in?

I've managed well for 30 years. I have a great wife, a wonderful family and a good circle of friends. And as a former battalion commander in the Swiss army, I have learned the art of how to organise systematically. It's certainly a great advantage that I live very close to Bern and don't have a long commute.



**President of the Council of States 2020/21**

Alex Kuprecht, Schwyz  
Swiss People's Party

### What will you set out to achieve during your year as president?

My aim will be to try to stimulate the special culture in the Council of States. In the Council of States, we conduct our debates through reasoned argument based on facts in order to reach the best solution. We should continue to carefully foster and uphold virtues such as giving careful consideration to the long-term interests of the state. In doing so, we serve as a valuable counterpoint to the more party-political and very often personal interest-driven nature of business in the National Council.

### Where do you see Switzerland in five years' time?

Well, I hope that COVID-19 is no longer with us. Beyond that, I think that we need to work on our relations with the European Union. I hope that Switzerland can retain its independence in the coming years. We have to position ourselves economically, socially and culturally, so that in five to ten years' time we will be able to say that Switzerland is where we want to live.

## Political parties and parliamentary groups

**Eleven parties** are represented in Parliament, none of which holds a majority (→ p. 26). There are five parties that each make up 10 % or more of the seats in the Federal Assembly (SVP: 24 %, SP: 20 %, FDP: 17 %, The Centre: 15 % and The Greens: 13 %). These parties are all represented in the Federal Council, with the exception of the Green Party, which gained over 10 % of the votes for the first time in the 2019 parliamentary elections. However, parliamentary groups all have greater clout than the parties in the parliamentary process.

Parliament is divided politically into **six parliamentary groups**. They are made up of Council members of the same party or of 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.

In the National Council, membership of a parliamentary group is particularly important, as it is a prerequisite to be 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.

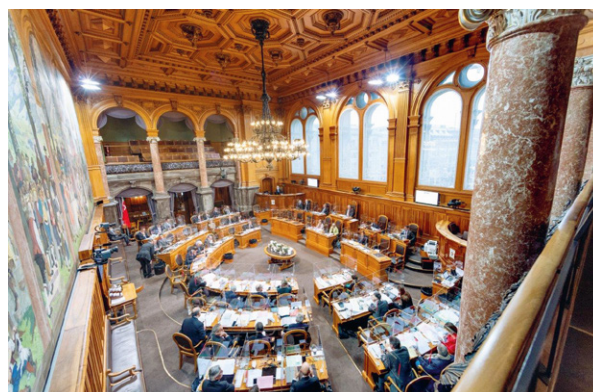
### Debates in the Councils

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, everyone may take the floor. This leaves more room for spontaneity.

**The parliamentary groups are important for the formation of political opinion. They discuss important items of Council business 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.**



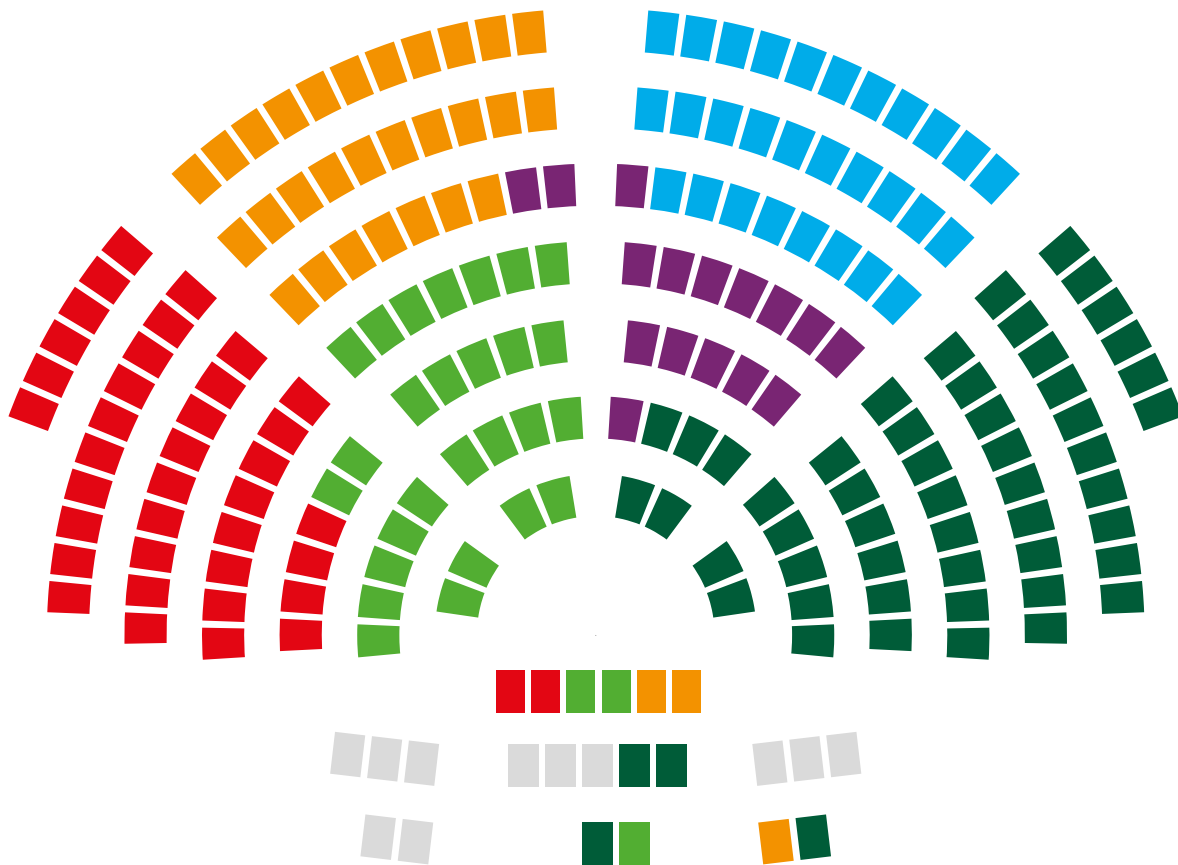
National Council chamber



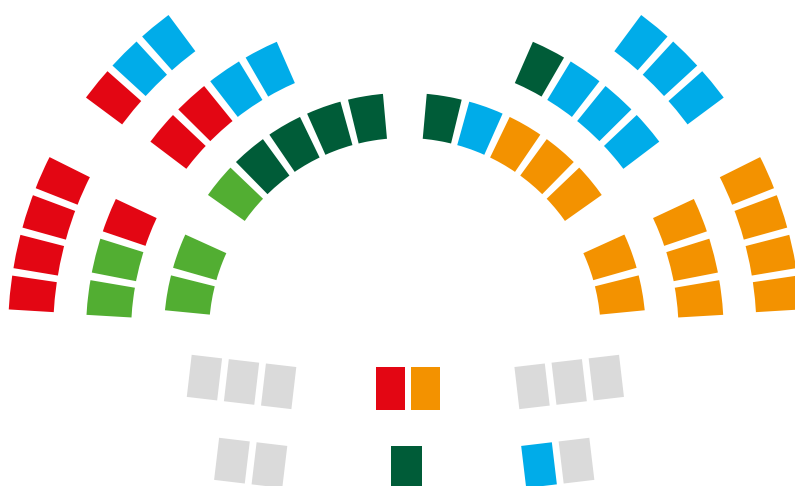
Council of States chamber

Parliamentary group	President	Composition/party	Total NC	CS	
● Group of the Swiss People's Party	Thomas Aeschi	59 SVP, 1 Lega, 1 EDU, 1 independent	62	55	7
● Social Democratic Group	Roger Nordmann	48 SP	48	39	9
● Centre group (The Centre-EVP)	Andrea Gmür-Schönenberger	41 The Centre, 3 EVP	44	31	13
● FDP.The Liberals Group	Beat Walti	41 FDP.The Liberals	41	29	12
● Green Group	Aline Trede	33 The Greens, 1 PdA, 1 EàG	35	30	5
● Green Liberal Group	Tiana Angelina Moser	16 GLP	16	16	0

Allocation of seats in the National Council



Allocation of seats in the Council of States



- SVP
- SP
- Centre group
- FDP.The Liberals
- The Greens
- GLP

[www.parliament.ch](http://www.parliament.ch) – Who sits where?  
(in German)



6

parliamentary groups

11

political parties

9

specialist committees  
per Council

2

supervisory committees  
per Council

## 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). Only four PlnCs have ever been appointed in the history of Switzerland, the last one in 1996.

### Delegations

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

Zimmer 286, a film about the work  
of the parliamentary committees  
(in German)



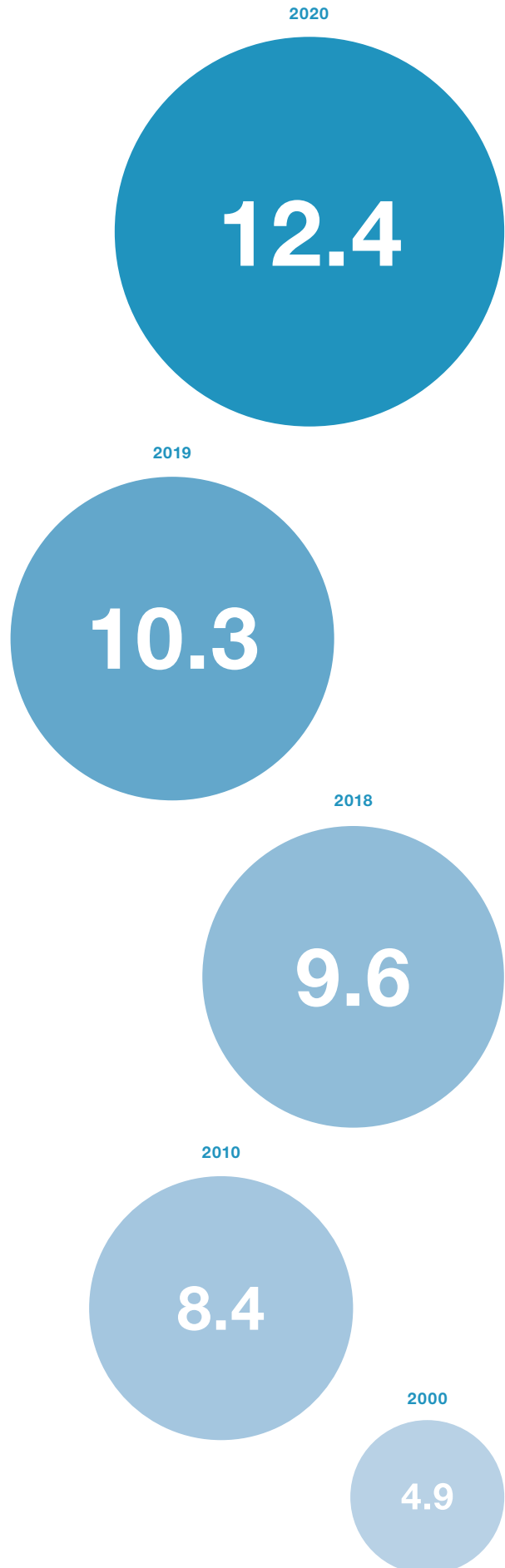
## Parliamentary instruments

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.

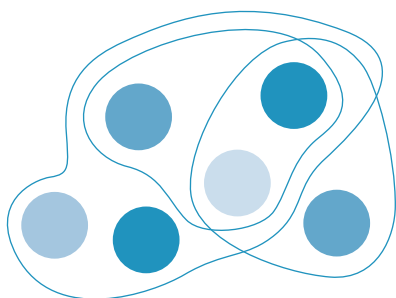
- Members of the Federal Assembly, parliamentary groups and committees can table a **parliamentary initiative** to propose draft legislation. If both Councils agree, a committee will draw up the draft legislation.
- A **motion** is used to instruct the Federal Council to draft legislation (an act or 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 depending on which parties agree on an issue.



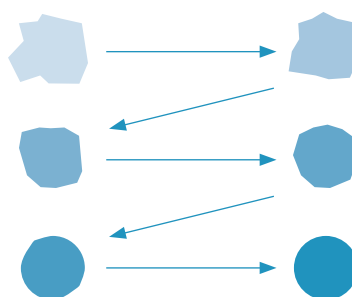
## Two councils with equal powers

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. So 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

The members of the Swiss parliament are not full-time politicians. Part-time politicians bring hands-on expertise to debates due to their professional activities, 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. Without agreement on the business, it is abandoned. (→ p. 43)



# Guten Tag! Bonjour! Buon giorno!

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## Three official languages

Parliament deliberates and legislates in the Confederation's three official languages: German, French and Italian. During National Council sessions, simultaneous interpretation into the two other official languages is provided for all member statements. 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.



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## 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 eligible voters before the vote. The pamphlet is also available online.



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## 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.



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## 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, eligible 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.



## The Federal Council and the Federal Administration

1

### Impetus

It is the Federal Council or Parliament that gives the impetus (in the form of a parliamentary initiative, a motion or a postulate → p. 39) for a new law. The cantons may also request a new law (cantonal initiative).

2

### Preliminary draft

The Federal Council instructs Department X to draw up a preliminary draft for a law. All departments and federal offices are consulted on this preliminary draft (office consultation procedure).

4

### Draft legislation

Department X prepares the preliminary draft law and adapts it on the basis of the results of the consultation procedure. It then submits the bill to the Federal Council.

3

### Consultation procedure

Department X submits the preliminary draft to the Federal Council, which initiates the consultation procedure. The consultation procedure allows all citizens, cantons, communes, political parties, federations, trade unions, associations, churches and interest groups to comment on the preliminary draft.

5

### Federal Council Dispatch

The Federal Council examines the bill and sends it to Parliament.



## Parliament

7

### Consultation in the first chamber (e.g. the National Council)

The first chamber has three options: it may consider the law to be superfluous and request that it not be enacted; it can reject the text and instruct the Federal Council or the committee concerned to revise it; or it can discuss the law in detail and make a decision.

6

### Preliminary examination by the committee of the first chamber

The presidents of the National Council and the Council of States decide whether the bill is dealt with first in the National Council or in the Council of States. A committee of the first chamber discusses the text and submits a proposal to its Council (first chamber). (Committees → p. 38).

## Milestones in national legislation

- 1919 System of proportional representation for the National Council elections
- 1948 OASI (Old Age and Survivors' Insurance)
- 1971 Women's right to vote
- 2000 Complete revision of the Federal Constitution
- 2000 Switzerland's bilateral agreements with the EU
- 2002 Switzerland's accession to the UN



## Swiss voters



### 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).

### Consultation in the second chamber (e.g. Council of States)

The second chamber has the same options as the first chamber: request to not enact the law, rejection of the text; or point by point deliberation and making a decision.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### Popular vote

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

### Entry into force

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

# 10 legal provisions that apply since the beginning of 2021



## Public transport

Passengers are now entitled to compensation if their journey is delayed by one hour or more.



## Radio and television fees

Radio and television fees for households have been reduced from CHF 365 to CHF 335. Those who receive supplementary benefits to OASI or Invalidation Insurance are still exempt.



## Driving test

A passed theory test is now valid for an unlimited period of time. A provisional driving licence can be applied for at the age of 17 instead of 18.



## Paternity leave

Fathers of newborn children are now entitled to two weeks of paternity leave, which they can take during the first six months after the birth.



## Motorway

In the event of congestion, slow-moving traffic or an accident, it is now permitted to pass moving cars on the right. Overtaking on the right and switching lanes again remains prohibited.



## CBD hemp

The production and marketing of seeds and seedlings for the production of CBD hemp in agriculture is permitted. The cultivation and use of narcotic hemp (cannabis) remains prohibited.



## Cycling

Children up to the age of 12 are allowed to cycle on the pavement if there are no cycle lanes or cycle tracks.



## Alcohol

Motorway service stations are now permitted to serve and sell alcoholic beverages.



## Women in executive positions

In large listed companies headquartered in Switzerland, a new benchmark of 30 per cent of women on the board of directors and 20 per cent on the executive board applies.



## Turning right

Cyclists and moped riders are now permitted to turn right at traffic lights if this is signalled.

## Was Einstein right?

Albert Einstein once said that “if the world were to end, I’d prefer to be in Switzerland. Everything happens five years later there.” Is he right? The end of the world could well be thrown off course in the consultation procedure, or at the very least in Parliament. There may well also be disagreement within the Federal Council on a reasonable time schedule for the end of the world. And Swiss voters will also have their say in the matter! One can assume that Swiss voters would reject the end of the world. It looks like, for once, Einstein was wrong: the world would not simply end a few years later in Switzerland, it would not be allowed to end, ever.

Excerpt from a speech by Federal Councillor  
Alain Berset

Federal law  
[www.fedlex.admin.ch](http://www.fedlex.admin.ch)

# The Parliamentary Services

**The Parliamentary Services support Council members in fulfilling their duties. They are answerable to Parliament and operate independently of the Federal Council and the Federal Administration.**

## Support for Parliament

The Parliamentary Services serve as Parliament's own independent staff office, which works on behalf of both chambers. The Parliamentary Services have a staff of around 300 (amounting to more than 200 full-time equivalents). Their tasks include organising Council and committee meetings and handling translations.

**The Parliamentary Services support Parliament in fulfilling its duties. They:**

- plan and organise Council sessions and the parliamentary committee meetings;
- provide a secretariat and translation services, and take the minutes of the debates of the Councils and the committees;
- advise Council members, in particular the presidents of the Councils and committees, on substantive issues and matters of procedure;
- inform the public about Parliament and its activities;
- support Parliament in maintaining international relations;
- manage the parliamentary library and provide documentation and IT services to Council members;
- provide an adequate infrastructure and perform many other parliamentary administration tasks.

## Open Day events for the general public

Every year, around 100,000 people visit the Swiss parliament. Visitors can watch Council debates from the galleries during the sessions. Between sessions, the Parliamentary Services offer guided tours of Parliament. Visitors can visit the parliament building without prior reservation during the Open Day events which are organised several times a year. Due to the high demand for visits during the sessions and guided tours, we recommend you make reservations as early as possible.

### Open Day schedule 2021

- 24 April
- 26 June
- 1 August
- 16 October



[www.parliament.ch](http://www.parliament.ch) – Visiting the Parliament Building

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
65 million

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
222



[www.parliament.ch](http://www.parliament.ch)



Parliamentary Services,  
Secretary General:  
Philippe Schwab

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 2021 was chosen by Guy Parmelin as he is president this year.





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# The Executive

# The Government

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**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 Administration is made up of seven departments and the Federal Chancellery. The Confederation's expenditure may not exceed its receipts over the longer term: this is ensured by the debt brake mechanism.**

[www.admin.ch](http://www.admin.ch)

## **Federal finances: checked and approved**

The Federal Constitution sets out what taxes the Confederation is allowed to raise. Maximum tax rates are defined for the main sources of receipts, namely direct federal tax and value added tax. These may only be modified if a majority of the People and the cantons agree (mandatory referendum, p. 22).

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 crisis situations such as serious recessions and natural disasters; the government may then undertake additional expenditure.

## **COVID-19**

The pandemic that has been raging around the world since early 2020 has had a significant impact on the state of federal finances. To support the economy and the people, the Federal Council and Parliament have taken a series of measures costing several billion francs. At the same time, the Confederation is expecting lower tax revenues than usual. Thanks to the low level of government debt, Switzerland and the Confederation in particular are in a solid position.



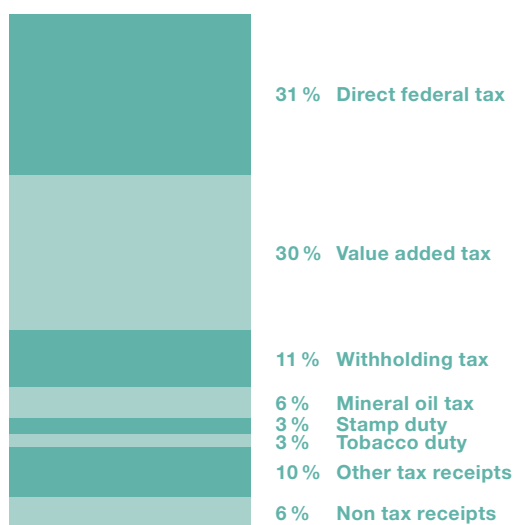
Taxes in Switzerland  
[www.ch.ch](http://www.ch.ch)



Youtube –  
The Federal Council – a brief guide

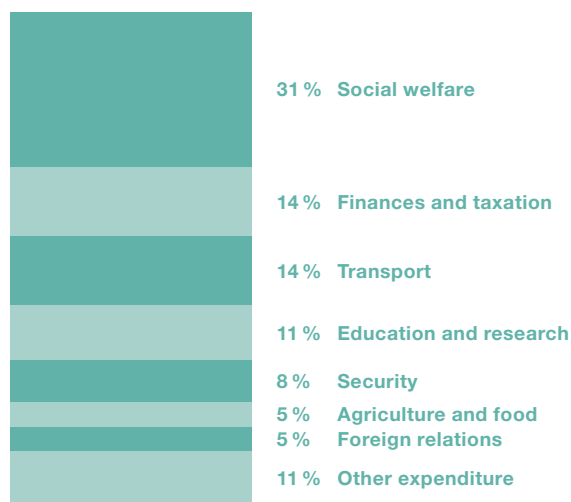


## Federal receipts and expenditure (2019)



### Receipts of 74.5 billion

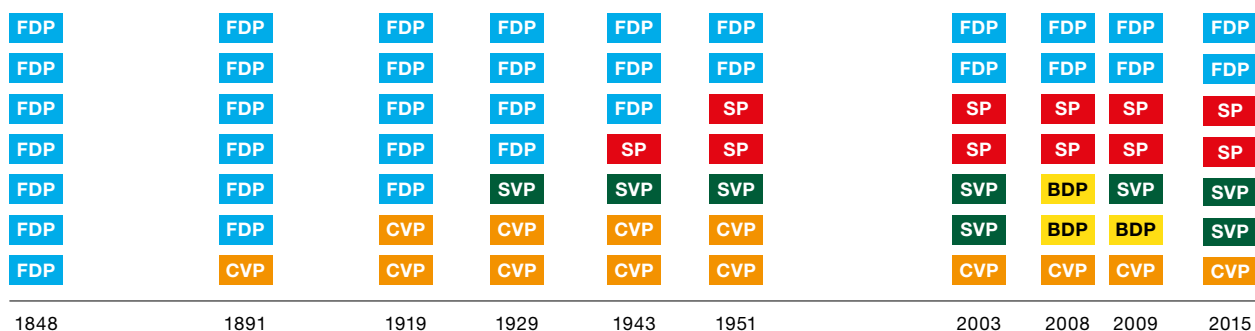
Direct federal tax and VAT are the Confederation's main sources of receipts. Direct federal tax is raised on the income of private individuals (progressive, max. 11,5%), and on business profits (8,5%). VAT is 7,7% on most goods and services.



### Expenditure of 71.4 billion

Almost a third of federal expenditure goes towards social welfare. Half of that goes towards old age pension provision (OASI), and a sixth to invalidity insurance (II). Other major areas of expenditure are supplementary benefits, health insurance premium reductions, and migration.

## Political party composition of the Federal Council since 1948



**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.

# 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 2500 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 and vice president:

8 December 2021

Election of the Federal Council (following the parliamentary elections in October)

December 2023

#### President



**Guy Parmelin**

Head of the Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research

Member of the Federal Council since 2016

Party affiliation



#### Vice President



**Ignazio Cassis**

Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Member of the Federal Council since 2017

Party affiliation



**Ueli Maurer**

Head of the Federal Department of Finance

Member of the Federal Council since 2009

Party affiliation



**Simonetta Sommaruga**

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

Member of the Federal Council since 2010

Party affiliation



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 1.1.2021).

## 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.

## Federal Chancellor



**Alain Berset**

Head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs  
Member of the Federal Council since 2012

Party affiliation

SP



**Viola Amherd**

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

Party affiliation

The Centre



**Karin Keller-Sutter**

Head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police  
Member of the Federal Council since 2019

Party affiliation

FDP



**Walter Thurnherr**

Federal Chancellor  
In office since 2016

Party affiliation

The Centre

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

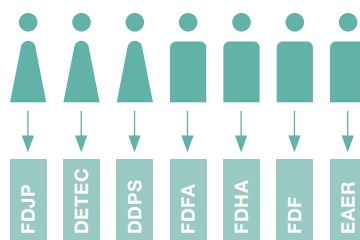
The Federal Council provides the cantons, Parliament and the general public with regular information on its decisions and intentions. It explains proposals that are being voted in a red booklet, which is posted to voters with their ballot papers and published on the internet.

[www.admin.ch/TV](http://www.admin.ch/TV)  
[www.admin.ch/news](http://www.admin.ch/news)  
[www.admin.ch/abstimmungen](http://www.admin.ch/abstimmungen)



## 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 38,000 employees. The Administration is organised into seven government departments. Each member of the Federal Council is the head of a department (→ p. 54/55).



President of the Swiss Confederation 2021  
Guy Parmelin

**As president you undoubtedly enjoy many privileges.**

**What are the main ones?**

The privileges enjoyed by the president include additional appearances at major events, more contact with the public, and more intensive exchanges with other countries. Chairing the weekly meetings of the Federal Council and giving speeches and written messages to mark special occasions are also a privilege. Everything that is associated with the presidency is an honour, and one that I accept with respect.

**Men and women and the different regions are currently well represented in the Federal Council. But who represents the interests of the younger generation?**

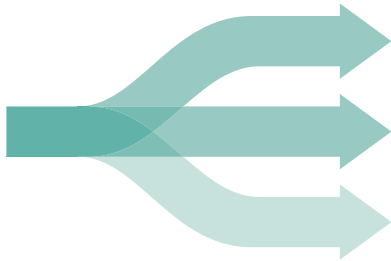
It's true that the younger generation is not directly represented in the Federal Council. But every federal councillor is backed up by a great many staff, and these people are of all ages. Young and older specialists alike contribute equally to the search for consensus. I enjoy talking to young people and listening to what they have to say.

**What are the strengths of our political system?**

It is our diversity that makes Switzerland strong. Our federalism – also a sign of diversity – sometimes seems complicated and time consuming, but it often leads to balanced solutions. And it creates a feeling of shared identity, which is something that cannot be taken for granted. We have to approach one another anew, listen to each other's views and seek a common approach.

**Governing in times of crisis**

**If Switzerland's internal or external security is endangered, the Federal Council has the power to issue emergency ordinances (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. As a result, the Federal Council was able to order drastic short-term measures during the coronavirus crisis in 2020: bans on public gatherings, emergency credits, short-time work, and even the cancellation of a popular vote. As required by law, Parliament gave its retrospective approval to all these decisions.**



## 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 legislature period 2019–2023**

1. Switzerland shall secure its prosperity sustainably and exploit the opportunities offered by digital transformation.
2. Switzerland shall encourage national cohesion and contribute to consolidating international cooperation.
3. Switzerland shall guarantee security, engage in protecting the climate and act as a reliable partner in the world.

These three elements in the Mission Statement themselves include 18 goals and 53 measures.

# Federal Administration

## Staff office

### FCh

Federal Chancellery

**Walter Thurnherr**

Federal Chancellor

### Autonomous organisation

Office of the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner

### 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

**Alain Berset**

Head of Department

General Secretariat

Federal Office for Gender Equality

Federal Office of Culture

Swiss Federal Archives

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

### Autonomous organisations

Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products Swissmedic

Swiss National Museum

Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia

### FDJP

Federal Department of Justice and Police

**Karin Keller-Sutter**

Head of Department

General Secretariat

State Secretariat for Migration

Federal Office of Justice

Federal Office of Police

### 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 Commission for the Exploitation of Copyrights and Related Rights

National Commission for the Prevention of Torture

38,765 (35,109 full-time equivalents) staff work in the Federal Administration. 1,155 of those are apprentices, 549 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.**

<p><b>DDPS</b> Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport</p> <p><b>Viola Amherd</b> Head of Department</p>	<p><b>FDF</b> Federal Department of Finance</p> <p><b>Ueli Maurer</b> Head of Department</p>	<p><b>EAER</b> Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research</p> <p><b>Guy Parmelin</b> Head of Department</p>	<p><b>DETEC</b> Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications</p> <p><b>Simonetta Sommaruga</b> Head of Department</p>
<p>General Secretariat</p>	<p>General Secretariat</p>	<p>General Secretariat</p>	<p>General Secretariat</p>
<p>Office of the Armed Forces Attorney General</p>	<p>State Secretariat for International Financial Matters</p>	<p>State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO</p>	<p>Federal Office of Transport</p>
<p>Federal Intelligence Service</p>	<p>Federal Finance Administration</p>	<p>State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation</p>	<p>Federal Office of Civil Aviation</p>
<p>Defence sector</p>	<p>Federal Office of Personnel</p>	<p>Federal Office for Agriculture</p>	<p>Swiss Federal Office of Energy</p>
<p>Federal Office for Defence Procurement armasuisse</p>	<p>Federal Tax Administration</p>	<p>Federal Office for National Economic Supply</p>	<p>Federal Roads Office</p>
<p>Federal Office of Topography swisstopo</p>	<p>Federal Customs Administration</p>	<p>Federal Office for Housing</p>	<p>Federal Office of Communications</p>
<p>Federal Office for Civil Protection</p>	<p>Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunications</p>	<p>Federal Office for Civilian Service</p>	<p>Federal Office for the Environment</p>
<p>Federal Office of Sport</p>	<p>Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics</p>	<p><b>Autonomous organisations</b></p>	<p>Federal Office for Spatial Development</p>
	<p><b>Autonomous organisations</b></p>	<p>Office of the Price Supervisor</p>	<p><b>Autonomous organisations</b></p>
	<p>Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority</p>	<p>Competition Commission</p>	<p>Swiss Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate</p>
	<p>Swiss Federal Audit Office</p>	<p>Board of the Federal Institutes of Technology ETH</p>	<p>Federal Inspectorate for Heavy Current Installations</p>
	<p>Federal Pension Fund PUBLICA</p>	<p>Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training</p>	<p>Swiss Transportation Safety Investigation Board</p>
		<p>Swiss Innovation Agency Innosuisse</p>	<p>Federal Electricity Commission ElCom</p>
			<p>Federal Communications Commission ComCom</p>
			<p>Independent Complaints Authority for Radio and Television</p>
			<p>Federal Postal Services Commission PostCom</p>
			<p>Rail Transport Commission RailCom</p>

# 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.







Walter Thurnherr  
Federal Chancellor since 2016

### 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

During their year as Swiss president, federal councillors assume additional tasks at home and abroad (→ 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 newly created DTI Sector has been in operation since 1.1.2021. It coordinates and supports digital transformation projects throughout the Federal Administration.

### 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 establish new trials for online voting in popular votes and elections in 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 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'.

[www.admin.ch](http://www.admin.ch)  
[www.ch.ch](http://www.ch.ch)  
[www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) – 'The Swiss Federal Council'  
[www.twitter.com/BR\\_Sprecher](https://www.twitter.com/BR_Sprecher)

**Vice Chancellor and Federal Council Spokesperson:**  
André Simonazzi

**Vice Chancellor:**  
Viktor Rossi

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
82 million

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
209

**Photo left**  
The Federal Chancellor and both vice chancellors always attend Federal Council meetings.



[www.bk.admin.ch](http://www.bk.admin.ch)

**Autonomous organisation**

**Office of the Federal Data Protection and Information Commissioner FDPIC:**  
Adrian Lobsiger  
[www.edoeb.admin.ch](http://www.edoeb.admin.ch)

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# Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

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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.





“Swiss foreign policy reflects the traditions, diversity and innovative strengths of our country.”

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

Switzerland supports conflicting parties in finding political solutions. It provides emergency assistance in humanitarian crises, creates economic opportunities in developing countries, and supports Swiss companies operating abroad. It promotes the sustainable use of natural resources and works to ensure that human rights are also respected in the virtual world. These are just some examples of what the FDFA does to fulfil its main mission: promoting Switzerland’s interests and values.

These interests and values are enshrined in the Federal Constitution. They include the freedom, autonomy and security of our country, the promotion of prosperity, the alleviation of need and poverty in the world, respect for human rights and the conservation of natural resources.

The Federal Council issues a foreign policy strategy every four years. The priorities for the 2020–23 period are peace and security, prosperity, sustainability and digital transformation. Other key concerns are the regulation of Swiss-EU relations and Switzerland’s exchanges with priority countries such as the US and China. The strategy provides the framework for the FDFA’s activities in Bern, Geneva and around 170 representations abroad. Both head office and the external network maintain contacts with Switzerland’s partner countries and the EU, and represent Switzerland at organisations such as the UN. They also provide services for Swiss citizens living or travelling abroad.

**General Secretariat GS-FDFA**

Secretary General: Markus Seiler  
[www.fdfa.admin.ch](http://www.fdfa.admin.ch)

**State Secretariat StS**

State Secretary: Livia Leu

**Directorate of International Law DIL**

Director:  
Corinne Ciceron Bühler

**Consular Directorate CD**

Director: Johannes Matyassy

**Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC**

Director: Patricia Danzi  
[www.fdfa.admin.ch/sdc](http://www.fdfa.admin.ch/sdc)

**Directorate for Resources DR**

Director:  
Tania Cavassini

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
2.98 bn

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
5,489

**Photo left**  
A weather station for farmers in Peru: the SDC supported the Climandes project to ensure good harvests.



[www.fdfa.admin.ch](http://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.





# “The public relies on a sound social insurance system and an accessible health system.”

Alain Berset, head of the FDHA.  
Member of the Federal Council since 2012.

The coronavirus pandemic shows us how important it is to have an effective health system that is accessible to all. It also shows that Switzerland has a sound social insurance system that can support people in all phases of life.

Despite the many cultural differences in the country, there is great cohesion in Swiss society during the coronavirus crisis. Solidarity is shown between the healthy and the sick, between the generations and among the language regions. The FDHA works constantly to defend such values; racism and discrimination have no place in our society.

The main challenges FDHA employees deal with in their daily work are reforming the social insurance and pension systems, keeping health costs down, ensuring food security and animal welfare, providing meteorological information for the public and support for the arts and culture. In all this it is important to have up-to-date and reliable statistics so that we can understand our constantly changing world and make well-founded decisions. Digitising, archiving and using this data in a wide variety of ways will continue to pose challenges into the future.

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
18.26 bn

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
2,472

**Photo left**  
During the pandemic, the Federal Office of Public Health informs the general public about how to protect itself against the virus.



[www.fdha.admin.ch](http://www.fdha.admin.ch)

## General Secretariat GS-FDHA

Secretary General: Lukas Gresch-Brunner  
[www.fdha.admin.ch](http://www.fdha.admin.ch)

**Federal Office for Gender Equality FOGE**  
Director: Sylvie Durrer  
[www.ebg.admin.ch](http://www.ebg.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Culture FOC**  
Director: Isabelle Chassot  
[www.bak.admin.ch](http://www.bak.admin.ch)

**Swiss Federal Archives SFA**  
Director: Philippe Künzler  
[www.bar.admin.ch](http://www.bar.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Meteorology and Climatology MeteoSwiss**  
Director: Peter Binder  
[www.meteoschweiz.admin.ch](http://www.meteoschweiz.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Public Health FOPH**  
Director: Anne Lévy  
[www.bag.admin.ch](http://www.bag.admin.ch)

**Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office FSVO**  
Director: Hans Wyss  
[www.blv.admin.ch](http://www.blv.admin.ch)

**Federal Statistical Office FSO**  
Director: Georges-Simon Ulrich  
[www.bfs.admin.ch](http://www.bfs.admin.ch)

**Federal Social Insurance Office FSIO**  
Director: Stéphane Rossini  
[www.bsv.admin.ch](http://www.bsv.admin.ch)

## Autonomous organisations

**Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products Swissmedic**  
Director: Raimund T. Bruhin  
[www.swissmedic.ch](http://www.swissmedic.ch)

**Swiss National Museum SNM**  
Director: Denise Tonella  
[www.nationalmuseum.ch](http://www.nationalmuseum.ch)

**Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia**  
Director: Philippe Bischof  
[www.prohelvetia.ch](http://www.prohelvetia.ch)

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# Federal Department of Justice and Police FDJP

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The FDJP is responsible for national and international police cooperation and so ensures internal security in Switzerland. It develops legislation in civil, criminal, constitutional and administrative law to reflect the needs of modern society. In addition, the FDJP regulates the conditions under which foreign nationals may enter, live and work in Switzerland, or obtain asylum here.





“Without security, there can be no freedom or prosperity at any level.”

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

More and more business processes are now conducted electronically. To ensure that there are clear rules for identifying a person online, the FDJP was closely involved in the drafting of the new Federal Act on Electronic Identification Services (E-ID Act). This law ensures that users can navigate the internet even more easily and securely. Another important project being handled by the FDJP is the revision of inheritance law. The Federal Council wants to remove obstacles to make it easier for family businesses to be passed on to family members. The reform aims to provide greater stability for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and secure jobs.

The FDJP ensures that the security authorities in Switzerland have the necessary legal instruments to guarantee security. For example, it is currently working on an amendment to the law that will permit public prosecutors and the police to use new methods of DNA analysis in their investigations. Using these methods, information about external characteristics such as hair, eye or skin colour can be extracted from a DNA trace. This can simplify investigations: the range of suspects – and of innocent people – may become clearer more quickly.

The FDJP also ensures that asylum procedures continue to be carried out quickly and fairly and that asylum seekers are housed in decent conditions in the federal asylum centres. Improvements continue to be made to the process of removing persons who are not entitled to stay in Switzerland.

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
2.84 bn

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
2,602

**Photo left**

The internet is now widely used for shopping and making payments. The Federal Office of Justice is developing a simple yet secure electronic ID.



[www.fdjp.admin.ch](http://www.fdjp.admin.ch)

**General Secretariat GS-FDJP**

Secretary General: Barbara Hübscher Schmuki  
[www.fdjp.admin.ch](http://www.fdjp.admin.ch)

**State Secretariat for Migration SEM**

State Secretary:  
Mario Gattiker  
[www.sem.admin.ch](http://www.sem.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Justice FOJ**

Director: Martin Dumermuth  
[www.bj.admin.ch](http://www.bj.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Police fedpol**

Director:  
Nicoletta della Valle  
[www.fedpol.admin.ch](http://www.fedpol.admin.ch)

**Post and Telecommunications Surveillance Service PTSS**

Director: René Koch  
[www.li.admin.ch](http://www.li.admin.ch)

**Autonomous organisations**

**Federal Institute of Intellectual Property IIP**

Director:  
Catherine Chammartin  
[www.ige.ch](http://www.ige.ch)

**Federal Institute of Metrology METAS**

Director: Philippe Richard  
[www.metas.ch](http://www.metas.ch)

**Swiss Institute of Comparative Law SICL**

Director: Christina Schmid  
[www.isdc.ch](http://www.isdc.ch)

**Federal Audit Oversight Authority FAOA**

Director: Reto Sanwald  
[www.rab-asr.ch](http://www.rab-asr.ch)

**Federal Gaming Board FGB**

Director: Jean-Marie Jordan  
[www.esbk.admin.ch](http://www.esbk.admin.ch)

**Federal Commission on Migration FCM**

President: Walter Leimgruber  
[www.ekm.admin.ch](http://www.ekm.admin.ch)

**Federal Arbitration Commission for the Exploitation of Copyrights and Related Rights**

President:  
Helen Kneubühler Dienst  
[www.eschk.admin.ch](http://www.eschk.admin.ch)

**National Commission for the Prevention of Torture NCPT**

President: Regula Mader  
[www.nkvf.admin.ch](http://www.nkvf.admin.ch)

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# Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport DDPS

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The DDPS is concerned with security matters and the protection of Switzerland and its population. It is responsible for dealing with threats in our airspace, on the ground and in cyberspace. The armed forces, Federal Intelligence Service, civil protection services and the Spiez Laboratory in the Federal Office for Civil Protection all play a role in fulfilling the DDPS remit.







# “The DDPS works to protect Switzerland and its population.”

Viola Amherd, head of the DDPS.  
Member of the Federal Council since 2019.

The DDPS has been heavily involved in Switzerland's response to the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to the armed forces and civil protection services, the Spiez Laboratory has also been actively involved in crisis management, particularly in the area of diagnostics, mask testing and improving coordination between test laboratories. This shows that threats can come from many quarters and consequently require a range of security policy instruments.

One important instrument is the Swiss Air Force. On 27 September 2020, voters came out in favour of renewing the means available to protect Swiss airspace. Mid-2021 will see a further milestone in the Air2030 programme, when the new fighter aircraft and the new extended-range ground-based air defence system will be selected. Selection will be based on an evaluation report demonstrating the cost-benefit ratio of the best candidates. The Federal Council will then decide which systems to procure on that basis and thus which type of aircraft will protect the country from air attack from 2030.

In 2021 there are other important projects on the horizon, such as extending support for sporting activities. The Federal Council will submit the NASAK 5 dispatch to Parliament, a proposal to provide federal funding for new sports facilities of national importance. Other projects include the revision of the Intelligence Service Act. In addition to formal corrections, the DDPS is examining whether procurement measures requiring approval are also necessary in order to tackle violent extremism.

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
7.1 bn

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
11,909

**Photo left**  
Important services provided during the pandemic: The Spiez Laboratory helps to protect Switzerland against nuclear, biological and chemical hazards.



[www.vbs.admin.ch](http://www.vbs.admin.ch)

## General Secretariat GS-DDPS

Secretary General: Toni Eder  
[www.gs-vbs.admin.ch](http://www.gs-vbs.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for Civil Protection FOCP

Director: Michaela Schärer  
[www.babs.admin.ch](http://www.babs.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for Defence Procurement armasuisse

Chief of Defence Procurement: Martin Sonderegger  
[www.armasuisse.ch](http://www.armasuisse.ch)

### Federal Office of Topography swisstopo

Director: Fridolin Wicki  
[www.swisstopo.ch](http://www.swisstopo.ch)

### Federal Office of Sport FOSPO

Director: Matthias Remund  
[www.baspo.ch](http://www.baspo.ch)

### Defence sector

Chief of the Armed Forces:  
Lieutenant General  
Thomas Süssli  
[www.armee.ch](http://www.armee.ch)

### Federal Intelligence Service FIS

Director:  
Jean-Philippe Gaudin  
[www.ndb.admin.ch](http://www.ndb.admin.ch)

### Office of the Armed Forces Attorney General

Armed Forces Attorney  
General: Stefan Flachsmann  
[www.oa.admin.ch](http://www.oa.admin.ch)

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# Federal Department of Finance FDF

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Federal finances, bridging credits, 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.





# “A healthy federal budget creates scope for action for future generations.”

Ueli Maurer, head of the FDF.  
Member of the Federal Council since 2009.

Sustainability is increasingly important in the financial sector. This represents an opportunity for environmentally responsible growth. Switzerland should become a leading location for sustainable financial services and the conditions should be designed to make the Swiss financial centre more competitive. Environmental and climate information should be available to everyone. Financial institutions should provide competent advice on sustainability and train their staff. Risks from environmental developments must be identified and priced in.

The pandemic has weighed heavily on federal finances. Switzerland’s government debt is low, so the country was in a relatively good starting position. The Federal Council and Parliament were able to approve high expenditure to cushion the impact. In the near future, however, the Confederation is likely to face lower receipts and calls to reduce COVID-19 debt. The Federal Council aims to meet the challenges for the federal budget without recourse to savings programmes if possible, so as not to jeopardise economic recovery.

Cyberattacks have become commonplace. Everyone must take personal responsibility in protecting against cyber-risks. The National Cybersecurity Centre, headed by the Federal Cybersecurity Delegate in the FDF, is the first point of contact for the general public, businesses, authorities and academia when it comes to cyberissues. The contact point receives reports, analyses them and forwards them to the relevant bodies.

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
15.73 bn.

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
8,716

**Photo left**  
The FOBL builds modern, energy-efficient administrative premises on behalf of the Confederation.



[www.efd.admin.ch](http://www.efd.admin.ch)

## General Secretariat GS-FDF

Secretary General: Rolf Götschmann  
[www.efd.admin.ch](http://www.efd.admin.ch)

## State Secretariat for International Finance SIF

State Secretary:  
Daniela Stoffel  
[www.sif.admin.ch](http://www.sif.admin.ch)

## Federal Finance Administration FFA

Director:  
Sabine D’Amelio-Favez  
[www.efv.admin.ch](http://www.efv.admin.ch)

## Federal Office of Personnel FOPER

Director: Rahel von Kaenel  
(from 1 March 2021)  
[www.epa.admin.ch](http://www.epa.admin.ch)

## Federal Tax Administration FTA

Director: Adrian Hug  
[www.estv.admin.ch](http://www.estv.admin.ch)

## Federal Customs Administration FCA

Director: Christian Bock  
[www.ezv.admin.ch](http://www.ezv.admin.ch)

## Federal Office of Information Technology, Systems and Telecommunications FOITT

Director: Dirk Lindemann  
[www.bit.admin.ch](http://www.bit.admin.ch)

## Federal Office for Buildings and Logistics FOBL

Director: Pierre Broje  
[www.bbl.admin.ch](http://www.bbl.admin.ch)

## Autonomous organisations

### Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority FINMA

Director: Mark Branson  
[www.finma.ch](http://www.finma.ch)

### Swiss Federal Audit Office SFAO

Director: Michel Huissoud  
[www.efk.admin.ch](http://www.efk.admin.ch)

### Federal Pension Fund PUBLICA

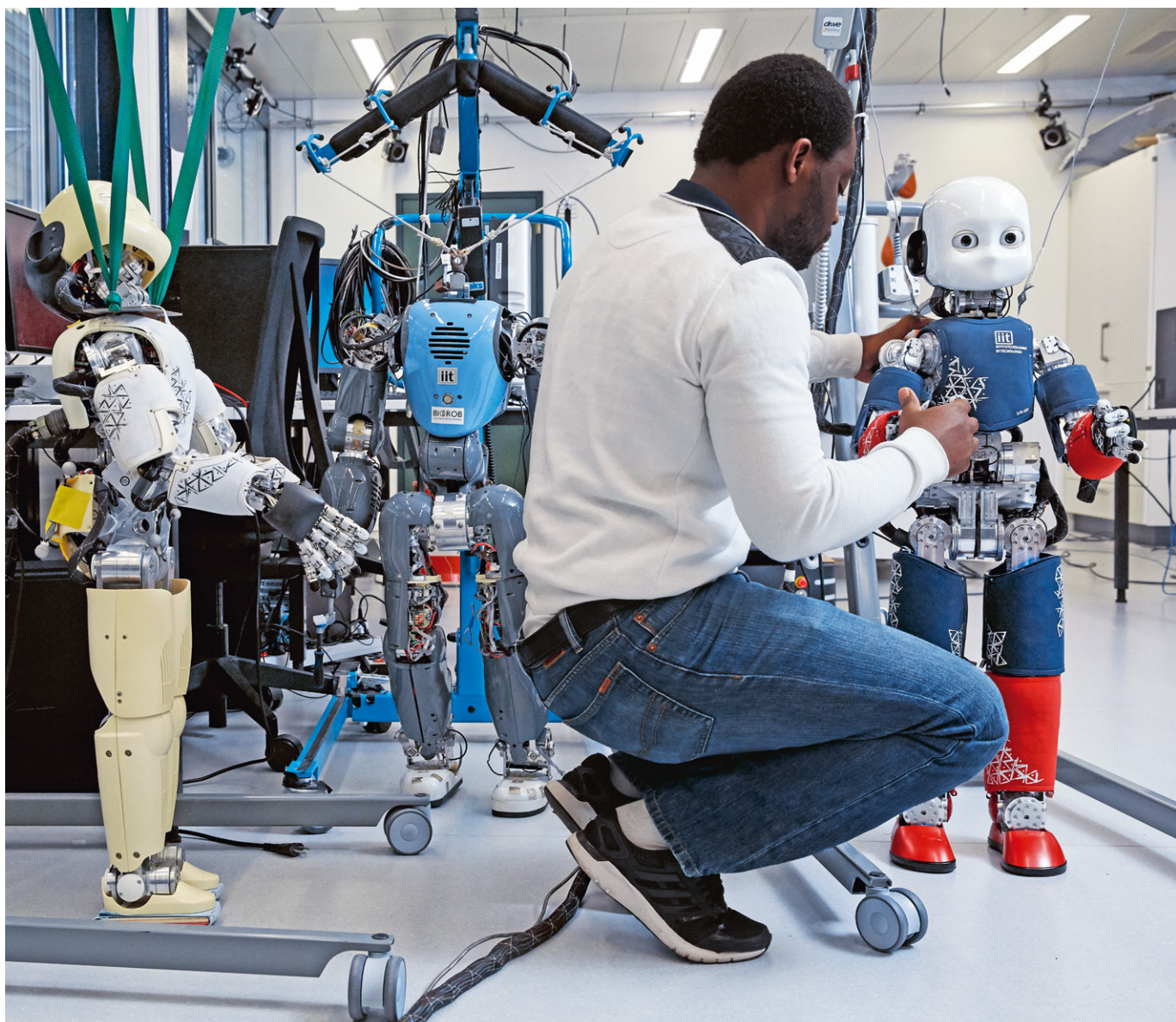
Director: Doris Bianchi  
[www.publica.ch](http://www.publica.ch)

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# Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research EAER

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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.





“COVID-19 forces us to take a fresh look at things that previously seemed unshakeable.”

Guy Parmelin, head of the EAER.  
Member of the Federal Council since 2016.  
President of the Swiss Confederation in 2021.

The EAER concerns itself with education, employment, research and economic affairs, all of which are closely linked. Sound education and training ensure that people in Switzerland can find employment that suits them. Nowadays it is unusual for someone to spend their entire working life in the same position. So continuing education and training is something that almost all of us have to consider sooner or later.

In the course of a person's career, the EAER is again the point of contact regarding working conditions and industrial relations. And if someone finds themselves out of work, unemployment insurance ensures that they have a financial cushion while seeking a new job.

The federal government sets framework conditions for the Swiss economy that offer stable conditions for business and encourage innovation. The EAER is responsible for implementing the government's economic measures. In today's digital age it is particularly important to limit regulation and cut red tape. The best way to make the economy more competitive is by promoting research and innovation, thereby opening up markets for our companies at home and abroad. The EAER naturally ensures the careful use of land and resources in these activities through the Federal Office for Agriculture.

### General Secretariat GS-EAER

Secretary General: Nathalie Goumaz  
[www.wbf.admin.ch](http://www.wbf.admin.ch)

### State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO

State Secretary:  
Marie-Gabrielle  
Ineichen-Fleisch  
[www.seco.admin.ch](http://www.seco.admin.ch)

### State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation SERI

State Secretary:  
Martina Hirayama  
[www.seri.admin.ch](http://www.seri.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for Agriculture FOAG

Director: Christian Hofer  
[www.foag.admin.ch](http://www.foag.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for National Economic Supply FONES

Delegate: Werner Meier  
[www.fones.admin.ch](http://www.fones.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for Housing FOH

Director: Martin Tschirren  
[www.bwo.admin.ch](http://www.bwo.admin.ch)

### Federal Office for Civilian Service CIVI

Director: Christoph Hartmann  
[www.zivi.admin.ch](http://www.zivi.admin.ch)

### Autonomous organisations

#### Office of the Price Supervisor

Price Supervisor:  
Stefan Meierhans  
[www.preisueberwacher.admin.ch](http://www.preisueberwacher.admin.ch)

#### Competition Commission COMCO

Director: Patrik Ducrey  
[www.weko.admin.ch](http://www.weko.admin.ch)

#### Board of the Federal Institutes of Technology ETH

President of the ETH Board:  
Michael O. Hengartner  
[www.ethrat.ch](http://www.ethrat.ch)

#### Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training SFIVET

Director: Barbara Fontanellaz  
[www.sfivet.swiss](http://www.sfivet.swiss)

#### Swiss Innovation Agency Innosuisse

Director: Annalise Eggimann  
[www.innosuisse.ch](http://www.innosuisse.ch)

### Expenses 2019 (CHF)

12.71 bn

### Staff (FTEs) 2019

2,104

#### Photo left

A PhD student works with the 'iCub' robot at the EPFL where research is conducted into artificial intelligence.



[www.wbf.admin.ch](http://www.wbf.admin.ch)

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

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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.





“The NRLA means heavy goods vehicles can be transferred from our roads to rail, helping us to protect the climate.”

Simonetta Sommaruga, head of DETEC.  
Member of the Federal Council since 2010.

The Lötschberg tunnel entered into operation in 2007, the Gotthard followed in 2016 and the Ceneri – the final section of the new rail link through the Alps – in 2020, marking the completion of the NRLA. Passengers are now able to travel more rapidly between north and south, Ticino has obtained a high-quality regional rail service, and we are consolidating our traffic transfer policy. We are now able to transport even more goods through Switzerland by rail instead of by road – just as the people of Switzerland decided in a series of popular votes. This protects nature, people and the climate.

Switzerland is an Alpine country and is particularly affected by the impact of climate change: the glaciers are melting, permafrost is thawing, and mountainsides are slipping into valleys. All of this poses a threat to people and infrastructure. DETEC is therefore striving to do more in terms of climate protection. In the field of energy, for example, we want to move away from oil and gas, which are expensive and harmful to the climate, and make a rapid switch to more solar, hydro- and wind power. This is what the public wants. We are therefore in the process of amending the Energy and Electricity Supply Act. With regard to the environment, Parliament has tightened up the CO<sub>2</sub> Act. This will enable us to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport, industry and buildings. And the Act gives a boost to renewable energies. In addition, we are creating orders and jobs for industry. An effective climate policy and a strong economy are not mutually incompatible. On the contrary, by moving away from oil and gas we can create jobs with long-term prospects here at home.

**Expenses 2019 (CHF)**  
12.59 bn

**Staff (FTEs) 2019**  
2,285

**Photo left**

August 2020: Finishing touches are made to tracks in the Ceneri base tunnel before the start of trial operations on 1 September 2020.



[www.uvek.admin.ch](http://www.uvek.admin.ch)

**General Secretariat GS-DETEC**

Secretary General: Matthias Ramsauer  
[www.uvek.admin.ch](http://www.uvek.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Transport FOT**

Director: Peter Füglistaler  
[www.bav.admin.ch](http://www.bav.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Civil Aviation FOCA**

Director: Christian Hegner  
[www.bazl.admin.ch](http://www.bazl.admin.ch)

**Swiss Federal Office of Energy SFOE**

Director: Benoît Revaz  
[www.bfe.admin.ch](http://www.bfe.admin.ch)

**Federal Roads Office FEDRO**

Director: Jürg Röthlisberger  
[www.astra.admin.ch](http://www.astra.admin.ch)

**Federal Office of Communications OFCOM**

Director: Bernard Maissen  
[www.bakom.admin.ch](http://www.bakom.admin.ch)

**Federal Office for the Environment FOEN**

Director: Kathrin Schneeberger  
[www.bafu.admin.ch](http://www.bafu.admin.ch)

**Federal Office for Spatial Development ARE**

Director: Maria Lezzi  
[www.are.admin.ch](http://www.are.admin.ch)

**Autonomous organisations**

**Swiss Federal Nuclear Safety Inspectorate ENSI**

Director: Marc Kenzelmann  
[www.ensi.ch](http://www.ensi.ch)

**Federal Inspectorate for Heavy Current Installations ESTI**

Director: Daniel Otti  
[www.esti.admin.ch](http://www.esti.admin.ch)

**Swiss Transportation Safety Investigation Board STSB**

President: Pieter Zeilstra  
[www.sust.admin.ch](http://www.sust.admin.ch)

**Federal Electricity Commission EICOM**

President: Werner Luginbühl  
[www.elcom.admin.ch](http://www.elcom.admin.ch)

**Federal Communications Commission ComCom**

President: Adrienne Corboud Fumagalli  
[www.comcom.admin.ch](http://www.comcom.admin.ch)

**Independent Complaints Authority for Radio and Television ICA**

President: Mascha Santschi Kallay  
[www.ubi.admin.ch](http://www.ubi.admin.ch)

**Federal Postal Services Commission PostCom**

President: Anne Seydoux-Christe  
[www.postcom.admin.ch](http://www.postcom.admin.ch)

**Rail Transport Commission RailCom**

President: Patrizia Danioth Halter  
[www.railcom.admin.ch](http://www.railcom.admin.ch)

The Judiciary **The Courts**

The federal judges deliberate and decide publicly on a case if they cannot reach agreement in writing. Before and during the hearings,

the ushers are also deployed. They perform countless other tasks in addition to distributing mail and files in the building.







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# The Judiciary

# The Courts

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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 judicial assistance in criminal matters. The Federal Administrative Court rules on appeals against rulings of the federal administrative authorities and the Federal Patent Court on disputes over invention patents.**

[www.eidgenoessischegerichte.ch](http://www.eidgenoessischegerichte.ch)

## 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 68<sup>th</sup> year of age.

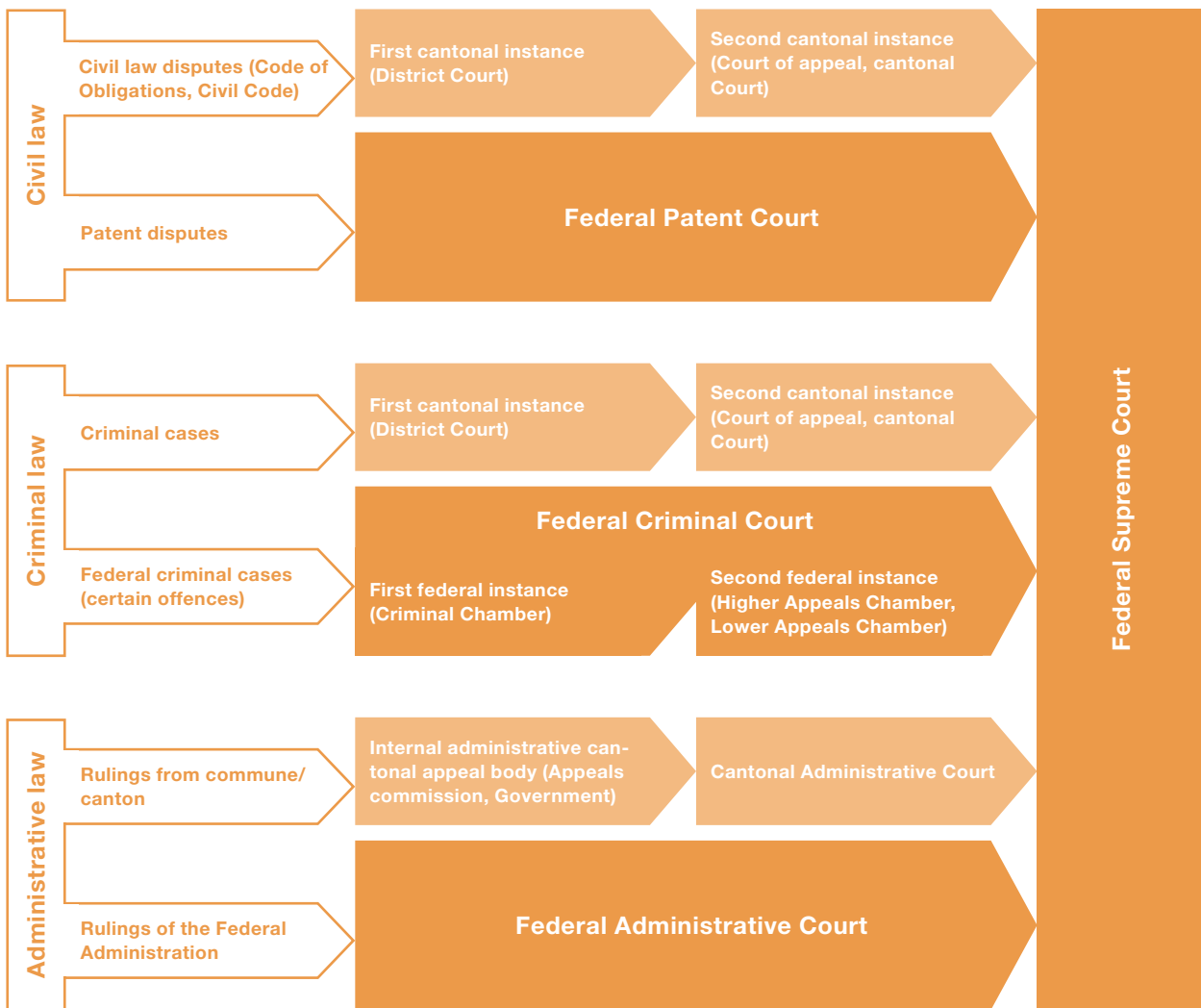
The United Federal Assembly also elects the presidents and vice-presidents of the courts. The presidential term of office is 2 years (with the exception of the Federal Patent Court: 6 years). A one-time re-election is possible.

There is no compulsory basic training for judges in Switzerland. A law degree is not mandatory, but it is the norm. Usually, judges at the federal courts have previously worked as judges of other instances, court clerks, law teachers, lawyers or as senior legal officials.

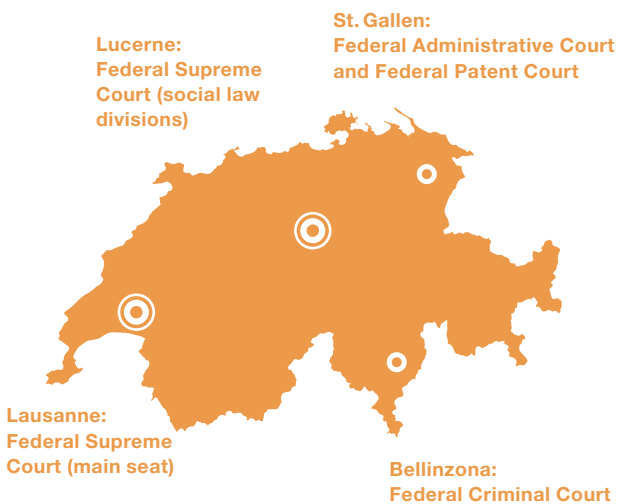


Presentation film  
The Federal Supreme Court

# Procedures in the Swiss legal system



## The federal courts are located at four sites



## In 2019 approximately 16,000 cases were closed



# Federal Supreme Court

The Federal Supreme Court rules in the highest instance on legal disputes between citizens, between citizens and the state, between cantons as well as between the federal government and the cantons. These disputes may concern matters in civil, criminal, administrative and social law.

[www.bger.ch](http://www.bger.ch) [www.eidgenoessischegerichte.ch](http://www.eidgenoessischegerichte.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 consists of

- two public law divisions (e.g. taxes, political rights)
- two civil law divisions (e.g. contract law, family law)
- a criminal law division
- two social law divisions (e.g. accident and disability insurance).

38 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 38 federal judges) decides on the most important questions. The seat of the Federal Supreme Court is in Lausanne. For historical reasons, the two social law divisions are located in Lucerne.

**President:** Martha Niquille

### Scheduled dates for public hearings

[www.bger.ch](http://www.bger.ch) > Rechtsprechung > Sitzungen (in German)

## Outcome and number of cases in 2019



3502

Rejected



3029

Declared inadmissible



1164

Approved (fully or partially)



241

Written off

**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.**

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## 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 rendered. 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. Film sequences 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 upon the request of a judge.



President of the  
Federal Supreme Court  
Martha Niquille

### Is the Federal Supreme Court also subject to review?

The Federal Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority in Switzerland. In this respect, there is no judicial review of our decisions. At most, an appeal can be submitted to the European Court of Human Rights. Our important decisions are discussed and criticised in scientific papers. We address this criticism, which is, so to speak, an internal control for us. As far as the administration of the court is concerned, we are subject to the supervision of the Parliament.

### The decisions of the Federal Supreme Court are discussed in the press...

Yes – and that is important. We are aware that it can be difficult for many citizens to understand legal terminology. Therefore, to better communicate our decisions, we now publish press releases more frequently.

### Specialisation is a trend – also at the Federal Supreme Court?

A rough kind of “specialisation” results from the fact that the seven court divisions are each responsible for specific areas of law. If these are very diverse, we take the specialised knowledge of a court member into account when assigning cases for the decisions to be drafted.

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



Publication of  
decisions  
[www.bger.ch](http://www.bger.ch)



Film sequences  
of public hearings  
[www.bger.ch](http://www.bger.ch)

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# Federal Criminal Court

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**The Federal Criminal Court rules at two instances on criminal cases of particular interest for 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](http://www.bstger.ch)

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## Functions

Most criminal offences are judged by cantonal courts. The Federal Criminal Court rules on criminal cases of particular interest for 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 rulings issued by federal prosecution authorities as well as authorities providing international mutual assistance in criminal matters. It also rules on conflicts of jurisdiction between prosecution authorities.

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## Organisation

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

The Court has 20 tenured and 13 part-time judges. Some 60 employees support them. The Federal Criminal Court's management bodies are the Administrative Commission and the Plenary Assembly (consisting of all tenured judges).

**President:** Sylvia Frei

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## Particularities

### Large procedures

A criminal procedure before the Federal Criminal Court may refer to several individuals and be multilingual, making translations necessary. At times special security measures have to be adopted for the hearings. The written judgment in large proceedings involving several parties regularly far exceeds a hundred pages.

### International context

Criminal procedures often have an international relation, especially in the area of economic crime and terrorism. The Lower Appeals Court decides amongst other things if Switzerland may extradite a person to another state, or if evidence (mostly bank records) is to be handed out to another state.

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### Criminal Chamber: cases by subject matter in 2019

18  
**Economic crime**

13  
**Money laundering**

12  
**Administrative criminal cases**

6  
**Criminal organisation**

6  
**Subsequent decisions (e.g. conversion of monetary penalty into imprisonment)**

2  
**Bribery**

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29  
**Other offences (e.g. counterfeiting of currency, explosives offences, aviation offences)**

# 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. The court is composed of six divisions and the General Secretariat, which is responsible for court administration.

[www.bvger.ch](http://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 asylum to fiscal law. The court also examines complaints against certain decisions made by cantonal governments such as those concerning hospital lists. Finally, it delivers judgments on legal action in three specific areas in the first instance, e.g. in cases involving public law contracts.

## Organisation

The Federal Administrative Court, which is based in St. Gallen, is composed of six divisions and the General Secretariat. Division I focuses on infrastructure, taxes, federal employment and data protection; Division II on economics, 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.

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

With 74 judges and 355 employees, it is Switzerland's largest federal court.

**President:** Marianne Rytter

7157 cases were closed in 2019

<b>5399</b>	<b>1758</b>	<b>287</b>
Not appealable to the Federal Supreme Court	Appealable to the Federal Supreme Court	Thereof appealed to the Federal Supreme Court



## Particularities

### Own investigations

In the event of a legal dispute, the Federal Administrative Court does not rely solely on the facts established in the lower-court proceedings and the arguments of the parties, but establishes the relevant facts of the case itself. Expert opinions may be commissioned and preparatory hearings or inspections undertaken in certain cases.

### Partly final

Each year, the court renders an average of 7,500 decisions – mostly in writing – in German, French and Italian. Most of its judgments are final.

# Federal Patent Court

The Federal Patent Court decides disputes relating to patents. The smallest of the federal courts, it regularly deals with international actors. With the agreement of the parties, pleadings and briefs can be in English.

[www.bundespateentgericht.ch/en](http://www.bundespateentgericht.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, they have been a matter for the Federal Patent Court. Its judgments may be appealed to the Federal Supreme Court.

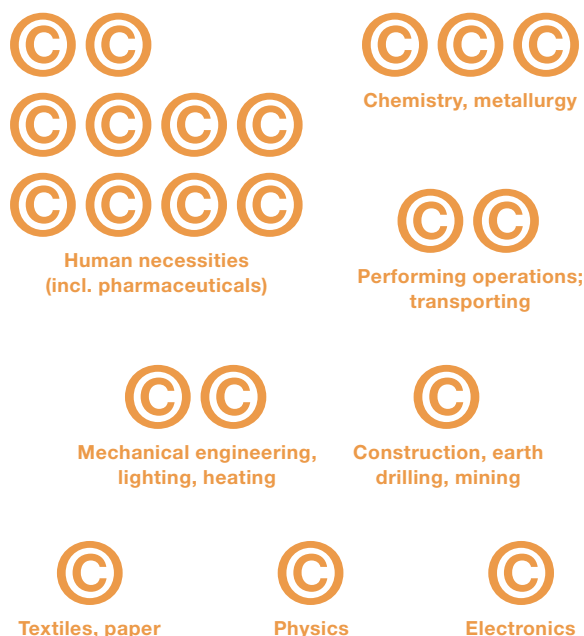
## Organisation

The Federal Patent Court is the smallest federal court. It is not split into different divisions. 41 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 2019



## Particularities

### English is also permitted as a language

International actors 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.



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## Judgments delivered by the federal courts

### Referendum

In 2019, the Federal Supreme Court overturned the 2016 federal vote on the popular initiative “In Favour of Marriage and Family – Against the Discrimination of Married Couples”. The Court came to the conclusion that the Federal Council had incompletely and with insufficient transparency informed the voters about important facts concerning the proposal. Because the initiative was only narrowly rejected, the result of the vote could have been different without the serious irregularities, which were subsequently identified. Judgment BGE 145 I 207

### Measles vaccination

According to a ruling by the Federal Supreme Court of 2020, if parents with joint custody cannot agree whether to vaccinate their children against measles, the competent authority must decide for them. The highest guiding principle for this decision is the children’s welfare. The recommendations of the Federal Office of Public Health must also be taken into consideration. This should only be differed from, if the measles vaccination is incompatible, in a particular case, with the children’s welfare. Judgment 5A\_789/2019

### Attorney General

Due to various breaches of official duty, the Supervisory Authority for the Office of the Attorney General sanctioned the Attorney General in March 2020, imposing an eight percent salary reduction for one year. In its judgment, the Federal Administrative Court upheld that the Attorney General had seriously breached his official duty and duty of loyalty in several respects. However, it rejected some accusations as unfounded and reduced the sanction by three percent. Judgment A-2138/2020

### Asylum procedure

In a landmark judgment, the Federal Administrative Court approved the appeal of an asylum seeker whose procedure were dealt with and decided on an accelerated basis. Despite the complexity of the case, the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) had not opted for extended procedure, resulting in only a short time limit of 7 working days to file an appeal instead of the standard 30 calendar days. The SEM was instructed to re-evaluate the application for asylum using the extended procedure. Judgment E-6713/2019

### Pre-trial detention

In 2020, the Federal Criminal Court rejected the appeal of Gambia’s former Interior Minister requesting his release from pre-trial detention. The Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland is conducting criminal proceedings against him investigating crimes against humanity. The Lower Appeals Chamber concluded that there is a strong suspicion that he is guilty of the investigated offences and that pre-trial detention lasting three and a half years so far is reasonable. Decree BH.2020.7 (confirmed by the Federal Supreme Court)

### Ventilator

In 2019, the Federal Patent Court partially upheld the complaint of a company with a patent for ventilators where certain respiratory values from the patient are displayed on a screen in the form of an animated lung for diagnostic purposes. The defendant is prohibited from distributing devices, which have features protected by the patent in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, among other activities, on penalty of a fine. Judgment O2017\_007

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Historic photos on pages 10/11 (chronological)  
Old Confederation: State Archive Schwyz  
Helvetic Republic: Swiss National Museum (SNM)  
Mediation: SNM  
Federal Treaty: Wikimedia Commons  
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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.*

