A UNIQUE POLITICAL SYSTEM OR

Swiss democracy
There is no other place in the world where voters are called to express their political will as often as they are in Switzerland. As a general rule, federal votes on several different issues are held four times a year. In addition, numerous cantonal and communal issues are put to the vote. These decisions are made by the Swiss people and not by their elected representatives. This is what is known as direct democracy. The community spirit of voting day is, however, gradually fading into the past. Meeting fellow voters at the polling station has become less likely since it is possible to vote by mail, and will become even more of an exception with the introduction of e-voting.
SWITZERLAND’S FEDERAL STRUCTURE OR
2715 plus 26 equals 1

Switzerland is a nation of consensus, composed of several ethnic groups with a variety of languages and religions. It has been a federal state since 1848. There are 23 federal states worldwide; Switzerland is the second oldest after the United States of America. Switzerland is a federal state and is organised in three political levels: the communes, the cantons and the Confederation.

2715 communes Communes are the smallest political units in Switzerland. There are currently 2715 communes, but their number is in decline as smaller communes are tending to merge together in order to carry out their tasks more efficiently. Roughly one fifth of the communes have their own parliament, especially the communes that are towns or cities. Four fifths of the communes, however, still make direct democratic decisions at the communal assembly, where all inhabitants who are entitled to vote may participate. In other words, the People are not represented by councillors, but make decisions themselves and elect the communal parliament.

In addition to the tasks that are allocated to them by the Confederation and their canton, such as managing the registry of residents or organising civil defence, the communes also have their own responsibilities, including those relating to schools, social services, energy supplies, road construction, local planning, taxes, etc. The communes regulate these matters to a large extent independently.

The communes’ level of autonomy is determined by the individual cantons, and can therefore vary considerably from place to place.

26 cantons The next largest political units are the states, which are known as cantons. They are the states that originally united in 1848 to form the Confederation, each relinquishing part of their sovereignty to the Confederation. Canton Jura is an exception. It is the only canton that was created in the 20th century. On 1 January 1979, it separated from Canton Bern to become a canton in its own right.

Under the Federal Constitution, all cantons have equal rights, and in comparison with the situation in other countries, they have a high degree of independence. Health care, education and culture are among the policy areas where they enjoy a large degree of latitude.

Each canton has its own constitution, and its own parliament, government and courts.

The size of the parliament varies between 58 and 180 members, who are all elected by the people, in most cantons by a system of proportional representation.

The 5 or 6-member governments are also all elected by the people; in 24 cantons by a simple majority system, while in Zug and Ticino the cantonal council is elected by proportional representation.

Direct democracy in the form of a People’s Assembly still exists only in Appenzell Innerhoden and Glarus. In all the other cantons, the people vote at the ballot box only.

The Ticino mountain village of Corippo in the Verzasca valley, which is subject to a preservation order, is Switzerland’s smallest commune, with 17 residents. In the mid-19th century, this village still had a population of more than 300, but now it no longer has any children. The second youngest person in the village is the 45-year-old mayor, Claudio Scettrini. Every three weeks, he calls the two members of the communal council to a meeting in the former schoolhouse, and a communal assembly is held twice a year, where the 14 eligible voters almost always all turn up.

“The Republic and Canton of Jura” is the official name given to the youngest member state of the Confederation. The region that makes up this canton has been part of the Confederation since 1815. Serious cultural tensions between the Catholic French-speaking population and the Protestant German-speaking majority in canton Bern led to a series of popular votes resulting in the separation. On 1 January 1979, Jura gained its independence by becoming the 26th canton of Switzerland.
1 Confederation is the name given to the Swiss state. CH is the abbreviation of Switzerland’s official Latin name “Confœderatio Helvetica”. Confœderatio means “confederation” and Helvetica refers to the Helvetii, an ancient Celtic people who settled in the region of present-day Switzerland roughly 2000 years ago. Switzerland has evolved over the course of more than seven hundred years from the alliance of the original three cantons, Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, to today’s federal state that unites the various interests of the individual cantons with the collective interests of the country. The Confederation has responsibilities in those areas where it is granted powers by the Constitution – for example in foreign and security policy, in customs and financial matters, in enacting legislation that applies throughout the country and in defence. Tasks that are not expressly designated federal matters are the responsibility of the next highest political unit, i.e. the cantons.

In contrast to other national flags, the Swiss flag is square-shaped. It only has a rectangular shape on the ships of Swiss shipping companies. The Swiss cross was carried as a battle standard by the original Swiss Confederates at the Battle of Laupen in 1339, but only became the official coat of arms in 1815. A quarter of a century later, it was agreed to adopt a standard flag for the armed forces with a white cross on a red background, and in 1889, the Federal Assembly determined the proportions: “an upright, free-standing white cross, whose equal arms are each one sixth longer than they are wide.”

The separation of powers
In Switzerland, the legislature, the executive and the judiciary are separate in terms of their personnel, but for functional purposes are only divided. This means that no one may belong to more than one of the three federal authorities (parliament, the government and the Supreme Court) at the same time; however, for practical purposes, each of the three authorities also carries out duties that, strictly speaking, fall within the competence of another power.

Who elects who?
In Switzerland, the People are the supreme political authority
Under the Federal Constitution, the people are the supreme political authority. The People comprises all adult men and women who hold Swiss citizenship, some 4.9 million citizens, and corresponds to almost two thirds of the resident population. People under the age of 18 and foreign nationals have no political rights at federal level.

The people elect the parliament:
the legislature
The Swiss parliament, which is the legislative branch of the state, has two chambers: The National Council represents the Swiss population as a whole and the Council of States represents the 26 cantons; together, they constitute the United Federal Assembly.

Parliament elects the government:
the executive
The Swiss government comprises the seven members of the Federal Council as well as the Federal Chancellor, who are each elected by the United Federal Assembly for a four-year term of office.

Parliament also elects the Supreme Court:
the judiciary
The supreme judicial authorities are the Federal Supreme Court in Lausanne and in Lucerne, together with its two courts of first instance: the Federal Criminal Court in Bellinzona and the Federal Administrative Court in Bern.
DIRECT DEMOCRACY AT FEDERAL LEVEL OR

One People, many rights

Switzerland is virtually the only country in the world where the people have such extensive decision-making powers. The longstanding democratic tradition, but also the comparatively small size of the population and the country, as well as a high literacy rate and sophisticated media services are crucial to the operation of this particular system of government. Swiss nationals have the following political rights at federal level:

**Elections or accumulating votes, vote splitting and crossing out votes** Every four years, the People elect the 200 members of the National Council. All Swiss citizens over the age of 18 may take part in elections, both actively and passively. In other words, they may cast their votes and stand for election themselves. Federal civil servants are required to choose between their profession and elected office should they be elected.

In the cantons with more than one seat in the National Council, eligible voters have a number of options to appoint their favourite candidates:

They may indicate the names of their preferred candidates in a blank list.

They may use a preprinted list of candidates provided by a specific party, with or without making any changes to the list.

The lists may be changed in three different ways, which may be combined:

Firstly, names can be struck off the list. Secondly, votes can be split, which means that votes are cast for members of different parties; in other words, a voter can take a name from one list and enter it on another list.

Thirdly, candidates may be accumulated, in other words, they can be entered twice on a list. Parties may also specify candidates twice (but no more than twice), thus accumulating votes in advance to enhance their election prospects.

The elections to the Council of States are not regulated at federal level, but all the cantons have settled for popular elections, so that all 246 federal members of parliament are elected directly by Swiss citizens.

**Voting or if you feel strongly about something** Those who are entitled to take part in parliamentary elections may also cast their vote in popular ballots, i.e. all Swiss citizens who have turned 18 and are not incapacitated on grounds of mental illness or mental debility.

Eligible voters are generally called on four times a year to vote on federal proposals. On average these votes involve three to four proposals that may be adopted or rejected; although in exceptional cases, there may be more than twice that many. Votes are held on people’s initiatives and referendums:

The *mandatory referendum* applies to all amendments to the Constitution and proposals for membership of specific international organisations. This means that a popular vote must be held. The acceptance of such proposals needs what is known as the double majority – the proposal must be accepted firstly by the popular majority, i.e. the majority of the valid votes cast in the whole country, and secondly by the cantonal majority, i.e. voters must accept the proposal in a majority of the cantons.

New laws and amendments to existing laws and similar parliamentary decisions, along with certain international treaties are only put to the vote if required by an *optional referendum*. A popular majority is sufficient for such a proposal to be accepted.

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**Voter turnout in National Council elections since 1919**

Voter turnout has significantly decreased since the first National Council elections using the system of proportional representation were held in 1919. The two main reasons for the comparatively low voter turnout in Switzerland are firstly that voters have frequent opportunities to express their views at the ballot box, not only in elections, but also in votes at communal, cantonal and federal levels. Secondly, elections are not that decisive in this country because power-sharing understandings between the main parties preclude any change of government. Since the introduction of postal voting in 1994, there has been a slight increase in voter participation.

**Voter turnout in federal votes since 1971**

Voter turnout in recent years has averaged slightly over 40 per cent. Some proposals have drawn far more voters to the polling stations, such as the people’s initiative for Switzerland without an Army (1989), which brought a 69% turnout and membership of the European Economic Area EEA (1992), which saw 78% of the electorate vote. Because Swiss citizens regularly have the opportunity to take part in decision making on political matters and other important issues, votes are more important in Switzerland than elections. Parliament in Switzerland has less influence than parliaments in countries that do not have direct democratic instruments.
Popular initiatives or Making law the Swiss way

Citizens may request that the People decide on an amendment they want to make to the Constitution. At federal level, unlike at cantonal level, it is impossible to request a new law or a new amendment.

For such an initiative to be accepted, the signatures of 100 000 voters who support the proposal must be collected within 18 months.

A popular initiative may be formulated as a general proposal or – much more often – be presented as a precisely formulated text whose wording can no longer be altered by parliament or the government.

The authorities sometimes respond to an initiative with a direct counter-proposal (generally less far-reaching) in the hope that the people and cantons will support that instead. Since 1987, the possibility of a double “yes” vote has existed in ballots on popular initiatives: voters may approve both the initiative and the counter-proposal. A deciding question determines which of the two texts will enter into force if both secure a popular majority and a majority of the cantons.

Popular initiatives do not originate from parliament or government, but from the People. They are regarded as the driving force behind direct democracy.

 Petition
Everyone - not just those eligible to vote - is entitled to address written requests, suggestions and complaints to the authorities.
The authorities in turn are required to take due note of such petitions, and although there is no law to say a response must be given, in practice every petition is considered and does receive a reply.
The petition may relate to any activity of the State.

Referendums or Voicing disagreement
The People are entitled to pronounce on parliamentary decisions after the event.

Federal legislation, decisions of parliament and certain international treaties are subject to an optional referendum: in this case, a popular ballot is held if 50 000 citizens so request. The signatures must be collected within 100 days of publication of the new legislation. The referendum is similar to a veto and has the effect of delaying and safeguarding the political process by blocking amendments adopted by parliament or the government or delaying their effect – the referendum is therefore often described as a brake applied by the People.

Referendums also contribute to political agreement because they prompt parliament to include as many interested parties as possible in the debate on new laws or legislative amendments and thereby allow a compromise to be reached that is supported by a majority, and which is unlikely to fall victim to an optional referendum later on.

Popular initiatives adopted and rejected since 1971

Of a total of 109 popular initiatives that were voted on the past 30-40 years, only eight saw a large turnout at the ballot box - i.e. not even one out of ten. The vast majority of initiatives achieved less than 50% votes in favour and were rejected. Most of these initiatives are not, however, entirely ineffective. The concerns they address often give rise to broad debate and are eventually translated, at least partially, into new laws.

Optional referendums since 1971

Since 1971, referendum committees have been successful on 88 occasions. They have forced popular ballots on federal acts and decrees approved by parliament that they did not agree with, and have won the day 28 times at the ballot box, which amounts to an almost one in three level of success.
The chart shows the percentage in favour at each of the different votes: less than 50% implies that the disputed legislation was rejected.
WHAT POLITICAL INTERESTS ARE REPRESENTED BY WHOM OR

The four political parties of the Federal Council...

Political parties are groupings of like-minded people that have their own philosophies of life – in other words, a particular view of the State, society and the economy, etc. They act as a link between the people and the institutions of the state and are essential for the functioning of a democracy. The landscape of political parties in Switzerland is as varied as that of the country. A dozen groups are represented in parliament. All twelve parties provide a brief self-portrait on the following pages, beginning with the four strongest parties that together constitute the government.

SVP
Swiss People’s Party

1 Federal Councillor (f) and 1 Federal Councillor (m)
7 members of the Council of States (m)
8 National Councillors (f) and 54 National Councillors (m)

With 29% of the seats in parliament, the Swiss People’s Party is Switzerland’s strongest party. It is represented in the Federal Council by Federal Councillors Samuel Schmid and Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. When Christoph Blocher was not re-elected to the Federal Council, the SVP declared itself to be an opposition party, excluding both SVP Federal Council members from its parliamentary group.

The party was formed in 1971 from the union of the Swiss Farmers, Trade and Citizen’s Party (BGB) and the Democratic Parties of the Cantons of Glarus and Graubünden.

SP
Swiss Social Democratic Party

1 Federal Councillor (f) and 1 Federal Councillor (m)
5 members (f) and 4 members (m) of the Council of States
18 National Councillors (f) and 25 National Councillors (m)

The SP places its emphasis on social, and environmental issues and greater openness in Switzerland. With Micheline Calmy-Rey and Moritz Leuenberger, the SP has two credible representatives in the Federal Council. The SP also plays an essential part in shaping government policy in the largest cities. The SP promotes social security, the fair distribution of wealth and equality of opportunity, issues that concern the majority of the population who do not earn huge salaries. The fight for values such as freedom, justice and solidarity is an ongoing task. Switzerland’s social achievements, which we are justly proud of, can be attributed in large part to the SP’s work. These achievements include the Old Age and Survivors’ Insurance (AHV), maternity insurance, child allowances and the Registered Partnership Act.

The SP focuses on three main areas:

• Social policy: The SP Switzerland champions a secure AHV, flexible retirement age affordable for all, equal education opportunities for everyone, 50,000 available spaces in crèches and equal opportunities.

• Openness: We champion an active foreign policy and a Switzerland showing solidarity that is committed to development aid, to peace and to human rights, and to EU membership.

• Environmental policy: The SP aims to optimise the public transport network, to improve energy efficiency and to promote renewable energy sources as a basis for the Switzerland of the future. It opposes nuclear power stations.
The Swiss Confederation a brief guide 19

The FDP’s project for the future of Switzerland focuses on:
• Intelligence in Switzerland: knowledge is our raw material. Our country needs to rank among the leading academic, research and cultural centres of the world.
• Growth in Switzerland: growth is the guarantee of our future. It is the product of everyone’s efforts and of good basic economic conditions.
• Fairness in Switzerland: fairness means equal opportunities. We live in a country that provides attractive and fair basic conditions and an efficient social security system.
• Openness in Switzerland: Switzerland is a tolerant, modern and open country that maintains constructive relations with Europe and with the rest of the world.
• With Pascal Couchepin and Hans-Rudolf Merz the FDP has two Federal Councillors who make a difference in Switzerland.

The CVP champions a liberal and social Switzerland. The CVP’s policy aims to create a balance between individuals and society and between personal responsibility and solidarity. Its approach to coexistence is based on a Christian view of mankind and society. Minister of Economic Affairs Doris Leuthard champions these values in the Federal Council.

The CVP is the business-friendly, socially responsible and independent power at the centre of the political arena. The CVP’s policies create jobs, guarantee financial support to our most important social institutions and improve the basic conditions for families. Thanks to a pragmatic climate and environment policy, the CVP is working towards a sustainable means of subsistence.

The CVP focuses on three main areas:
• The CVP promotes Switzerland as a business location with innovative strengths, attractive tax incentives, excellent infrastructure and a high standard of education. This policy ensures jobs and prosperity.
• The CVP promotes family values: families need improved conditions in which to bring up and care for their children, above all, to achieve a better work-life balance.
• The CVP safeguards the social security system: funding social institutions is the main challenge for the next 20 years. This can only be accomplished through targeted reforms and by avoiding unrealistic expansion or cutbacks.
...as well as the eight other political parties in parliament

**GPS**  
**Swiss Green Party**  
Party President: 600 members  
National Councillor: Ruth Genner  
Founded in 1983  
[www.gruene.ch](http://www.gruene.ch)

The Swiss Green Party is the largest party that does not have a seat in the Federal Council. With the exception of canton Obwalden, every canton has a green party. Since 2003, there has been a young Green Party, whose members have been actively involved in fighting for the environment, equal opportunities and fair globalisation using a great deal of imagination.

Our primary concerns for this legislative period are more effective climate protection (including above all the introduction of a CO₂ tax on fuel), the reorganisation of the economy along more environmental lines, the strengthening of social institutions and an active policy of peace without armaments cooperation.

**LPS**  
**Swiss Liberal Party**  
Party President: 20,000 members  
National Councillor: Claude Ruey  
Founded in 1993  
[www.liberal.ch](http://www.liberal.ch)

The Swiss Liberal Party represents an all-embracing set of views embodied in timeless values, originating in particular from the Age of Enlightenment. It champions personal freedom, consideration for fellow human beings, respect for different identities, responsibility, creativity and personal initiative. The LPS defends and exemplifies these values as they have proven to be the only means to economic and social progress. The LPS is a centre-right party and plays an important role in government and parliament in the cantons of Basel-Stadt, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Vaud. It is also a presence in political life in the cantons of Bern, Fribourg, Valais and Zurich.

**GLP**  
**Swiss Green Liberal Party**  
Party President: 1,000 members  
National Councillor: Martin Baume  
Founded in 2004  
[www.grunliberale.ch](http://www.grunliberale.ch)

Environment: everyone depends on an intact environment as the very basis for our existence. We want to leave a liveable world behind without contaminated areas, so that future generations may also enjoy their lives.

Finance: the state should operate as an effective service company focused on core tasks. It should not be burdened by debt, but should rely on the personal responsibility of all individuals.

Social issues: it is important first of all to encourage personal contributions, a sense of responsibility and solidarity. Support measures should be targeted and incentive-based, and yet respect human dignity.

**EVP**  
**Swiss Evangelical People’s Party**  
Party President: 4,500 members  
National Councillor: Ruedi Aeschbach  
Founded in 1909  
[www.evpec.ch](http://www.evpec.ch)

Stronger families: the EVP aims to relieve the financial burden on families and where necessary to support families. For this purpose, the EVP promotes child benefits that would replace all other payments and deductions and be financed by taxes.

A fair economy: in other words, debt reduction, fair minimum and maximum wages, a simple tax system without loopholes and fair trade.

A healthy environment: the EVP wants to quickly reduce Switzerland’s dependence on non-renewable energy sources. It therefore promotes the introduction of ecological tax reforms and a CO₂ charge on transport fuel.
The diagrams are based on the votes in the legislative period 2003–2007 and show the positions of the different members and their voting behaviour.

**CSP**  
**Christian Social Party**  
Energy policy: The CSP is against the construction of new nuclear power stations. Alternative energies and energy conservation need to be promoted. The CSP aims for a 2000 Watt society.

Social policy: state pensions must be guaranteed. Pensioners need to be sure that their pensions are secure. Additional funds are necessary in the medium term for this purpose. We must take advantage of the current healthy economic situation to restructure invalidity insurance (IV) and unemployment insurance. Both insurances need to be reorganised in order to cope with future crises. Value-added tax must be increased to provide the revenues to clear IV debts.

**EDU**  
**Federal Democratic Union**  
True values and clear words! The EDU seeks sustainable solutions and in its commitment to God Almighty, it promotes a free and constitutional Switzerland. The EDU does not follow the zeitgeist or the mainstream, but adheres to fundamental values, the word of God and the creation of the world and of mankind according to the Bible. The EDU encourages people to assume responsibility for their actions. The focal points of our policy include protection of human life at every stage of its existence as well as the environment and the private sphere, traditional marriage and family values, education and the job market in Switzerland, balanced finances and debt reduction.

**Lega**  
**Ticino League**  
Independence: economic and political globalisation is weakening Switzerland. Switzerland can however gain a footing in a fragmented Europe if it safeguards its independence and its freedom.

Public services: the federal government must conserve its public services and ensure the same conditions for all people throughout the country. Privatisations should be avoided whenever possible.

Mobility: Ticino needs better connections to the rest of the country. The Gotthard route has reached its limits. Natural hazards and structural problems are jeopardising unrestricted use of this route.

**PdA**  
**Worker’s Party**  
The PdA intends to work with all forces who oppose capitalism to free humankind from exploitation and oppression. It supports all people and movements that believe that a better world is possible and that are working towards achieving that goal. The PdA’s commitment knows no frontiers, because its fight against injustice is worldwide.

PdA activists are present at all levels of Swiss politics, and share a common goal, which is to make proposals to create a solidarity-based society, to promote personal development for all people and to protect the environment – in short, to create a genuinely socialist society.