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# Six questions and answers ...

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... to better understand  
the workings of the  
National Council and  
Council of States



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## How closely do parliamentarians follow Council debates?

The sight of a half-empty chamber when Parliament is in session could give the impression that Council members are not taking their work very seriously. However, it is important to note that by the time an item of business is actually debated in the chamber, most of the legislative work has been done and many decisions have in fact already been taken. Parliamentarians usually form their opinions in the preliminary consultation committees and in the parliamentary groups. The main purpose of the debates in Parliament is to provide transparency to the public.

What is important is that Council members are present when votes take place, which is usually the case. When a vote is about to be held, they are notified by text message and a gong chime that can be heard throughout the building, indicating they should swiftly take up their seats to cast their vote.

During the session, however, Council members have many other commitments: they attend committee and group meetings, formulate their statements, draft proposals, answer (their) correspondence, talk to representatives of the Federal Administration and federal councillors, meet visitors and give interviews.

So, in actual fact, they are hard at work in the Parliament Building.

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## How much do parliamentarians earn?

Most Council members are part-time politicians and continue their professional activities alongside their parliamentary mandate. In addition to the 55 or so days of sessions, they also attend committee meetings, which add another 30 to 50 days for National Council members, and 40 to 70 days for Council of State members.

They receive an average salary of CHF 79,000 for meetings, including preparation time, plus an expense allowance of CHF 63,000 per year. This makes the Swiss parliament one of the most cost-efficient in the world. The entire parliamentary operation costs CHF 119 million per year, or CHF 13 per capita.

Council members come from a wide range of professions, from doctors and lawyers to farmers, local politicians, teachers, entrepreneurs and association presidents.

In order to avoid any potential conflict of interest between their parliamentary mandate and their vested interests, Council members are required to declare their professional activities, including board membership mandates, permanent management positions, consultancy mandates, etc.









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## How are debates conducted during the session?

The packed agenda does not allow all 200 members of the National Council to express their views freely on every item of business. Debates are therefore conducted according to strict rules. Council members who wish to speak must register in writing with the Council president and are given the floor in the order in which they register. However, the person who submits the proposal and the group spokesperson may speak before them. The committee rapporteur and the Federal Council member responsible for the item of business may request the floor at any time. Depending on their importance, procedural requests and bills are divided into five categories, ranging from open debate to written procedure. In the National Council, the speaking time is limited to five minutes for an individual speaker and ten minutes for the group spokesperson.

In the Council of States, each of the 46 members may speak spontaneously and without a time limit after the committee rapporteur has finished. Again, a member of the Federal Council may respond to each speaker.

Each Council first holds an introductory debate on the merits of a bill. In the detailed consideration that follows, it goes through the bill, article by article, and finally votes on it as a whole.

Council members deliver their statements in their language. In the National Council, the statements are simultaneously translated into all three official languages.

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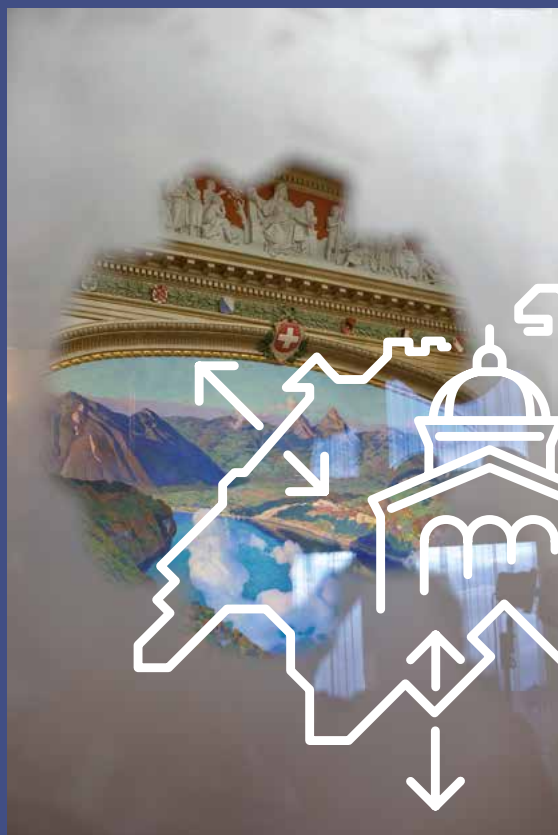
## Can a semi-professional parliament manage the increasing workload?

Demographic change, technological progress, migration, climate change – the world is changing faster and faster in many areas. As a result, parliamentarians are confronted with ever more complex issues, reflected not least in the ever-increasing number of initiatives and legislative proposals, many of them urgent. At the same time, all sections of the population have become more demanding of the state, and therefore of Parliament. Digitalisation, with its almost round-the-clock accessibility, is a contributing factor.

During the three-week sessions – in March, June, September and December – working days are long and often do not end until 8pm. Committee or parliamentary group meetings are often scheduled before the official start of the sitting. In addition, there are around 600 committee meetings throughout the year, most of which last several days.

This raises the question of whether Switzerland's semi-professional system has reached breaking point. Part-time politicians do, however, bring practical experience to debates and legislative work. They are also more down-to-earth, more accessible to the people and better able to address their concerns.





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## What about Parliament's international relations?

Although it is primarily the Federal Council that represents Switzerland abroad, Parliament has a right to participate in the decision-making process on foreign policy. In recent decades, international economic relations have intensified, resulting in a growing number of international treaties. As these treaties usually have an impact on national law, the Federal Council and Parliament increasingly work together in this area. The Federal Council also consults the Foreign Affairs Committees on numerous projects.

The Swiss parliament maintains a wide range of international contacts, particularly with foreign parliaments, and participates in international parliamentary bodies such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the French-speaking Parliamentary Assembly and the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE, the Council of Europe and EFTA. These contacts enable Council members, the Council presidencies and the members of the various committees and delegations to gain their own foreign policy experience and to obtain first-hand information. They also help to promote Swiss interests abroad and to shape the decisions of interparliamentary organisations.



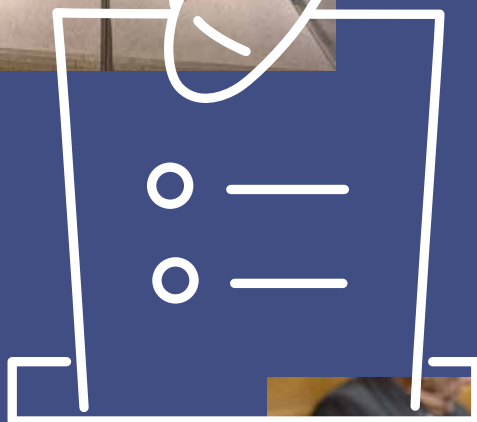
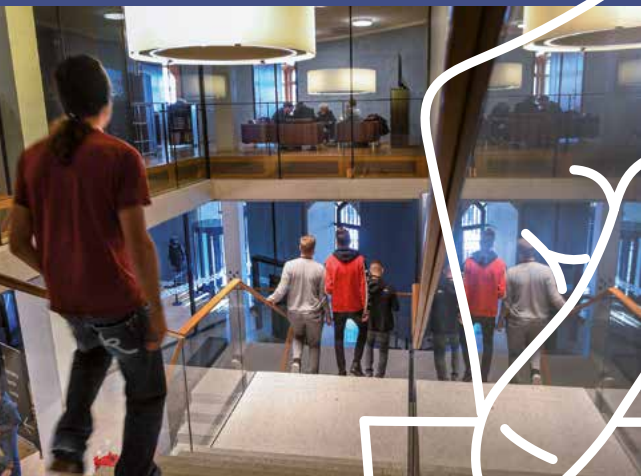
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## What has Parliament got to do with me?

We are often unaware of it, but almost every aspect of our lives is affected by political – and often parliamentary – decisions, from the radio station we listen to in the morning (telecommunications law) and the quality of the food in our fridge (agricultural law), to our school and working day (education and labour law) and the opening hours of our favourite bar, to name but a few examples. If you are eligible to vote in Switzerland and want to change something, you can collect signatures for your cause, vote, take part in referendums or join associations or political parties.

That was not always the case. A hundred years ago, no country in the world had free and fair elections in which all citizens of a certain minimum age could participate. In Switzerland, women have only been allowed to vote at federal level since 1971, and 18-year-olds since 1991. All of this had to be fought for over time. Exercising democratic rights is not a matter of course, as press reports remind us on an almost daily basis. Political participation requires a free, well-informed and committed electorate that knows and exercises its rights and obligations, and makes corrections where necessary.





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