

UNION INTERPARLEMENTAIRE



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments

PRESENTATION

by

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ROLE OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL AND APPOINTMENT PROCEDURE

**Istanbul session
April 2026**

The Secretary General of the Swiss Parliament: a key player in maintaining institutional equilibrium and administrative continuity within a bicameral system

1. Introduction: Two chambers, yet one Secretary General

Switzerland is a federal state. This defines the structure of its Parliament, which consists of two chambers: the National Council, representing the people, and the Council of States, representing the cantons. Together they form the Federal Assembly. These two chambers, which have strictly equal powers, generally deliberate items of business separately and participate in the legislative process on an equal footing, with neither having formal or substantive primacy (symmetrical bicameralism). Neither chamber has priority in the consideration of bills: a bill may be considered first by either chamber. The adoption of any parliamentary decision therefore requires the agreement of both chambers; otherwise, the bill is abandoned. This requirement for dual approval necessitates close cooperation and a continual search for compromise between the two bodies.

The two chambers have the same status and follow the same procedures.¹ There are only a small number of organisational and procedural differences, which are covered by separate regulations.² For example, the National Council is the only chamber to hold question time with the government and impose limits on speaking time.

Both chambers are subject to a unified parliamentary budget and administration, under the exclusive authority of Parliament. This autonomy, both budgetary (as provided for by law³) and administrative (guaranteed by the Constitution⁴), underscores the institutional independence of the legislature from the executive. However, this complete control does not prevent budget requests from taking into account the constraints imposed on the state's financial system, such as compliance with the debt brake.⁵

The institutional and administrative integration of the two chambers is also reflected in the fact that there is a single Secretary General, a key figure in the parliamentary administration.

2. Role and responsibilities of the Secretary General: administrator and strategist

2.1. Legal framework and institutional position

The post of Secretary General of the Federal Assembly is the institution's highest administrative office. It is a strictly non-political post governed by a multifaceted legal

¹ See, for example, the Federal Act of 13 December 2002 on the Federal Assembly (Parliament Act, ParlA); Federal Act of 18 March 1988 on Remuneration and Infrastructure of Members of the Swiss Councils and on the Contributions to the Parliamentary Groups; Federal Assembly Ordinance of 3 October 2003 on the Parliament Act and on Parliamentary Administration (Parliamentary Administration Ordinance, PAdminO); Federal Assembly Ordinance of 28 September 2012 on International Parliamentary Relations (OIPR); Federal Assembly Ordinance of 18 March 1988 to the Parliamentary Resources Act (ParlRO).

² Standing Orders of the National Council of 3 October 2003 (NCSO); Standing Orders of the Council of States of 20 June 2003 (CSSO).

³ Art. 142 paras 2 and 3, ParlA.

⁴ Art. 155 of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation of 18 April 1999 (Cst.).

⁵ Art. 126 Cst.

framework: constitutional (Art. 155 of the Constitution), legislative (Arts 64–70 ParlA, Arts 17–35 PAdminO) and regulatory.⁶

The Secretary General's primary mission is to ensure the continuity, stability and effectiveness of parliamentary work by ensuring that Parliament functions smoothly in both administrative and procedural terms.

2.2. A threefold function: administration, advice and liaison

The Secretary General fulfils three complementary roles:⁷

- (i) **Head of Parliament's administration**
He oversees administrative services, optimises the allocation of human and material resources, and chairs the management board of the Parliamentary Services, which comprises heads of various services (committees, digital services, international affairs, communications, human resources and finance, etc.). He sets strategy⁸ and ensures that the necessary resources are available for parliamentary business.
- (ii) **Chief of Staff to Parliament**
He acts as the primary point of contact for Council presidents and members of Parliament, plans committee meetings and sessions, prepares agendas, ensures that the legislative timetable is adhered to, and produces minutes and translations. The various services provide technical and procedural support to members of Parliament and serve as the secretariat for the offices of the Federal Assembly and its two chambers.
- (iii) **Institutional liaison**
He facilitates the communication of parliamentary proceedings, manages administrative relations with the government, and supports parliamentary diplomacy (relations with foreign parliaments, international organisations and delegations). As such he contributes to the institution's transparency and to inter-parliamentary cooperation.

The Secretary General is accountable to Parliament as a whole, in accordance with the rules of procedure and the budget set by the Federal Assembly. His work, which is entirely free from partisan considerations, is driven by a commitment to public service for the benefit of all members of Parliament. On a day-to-day basis, he reports directly to the presidencies of the two Councils that make up the Administration Delegation. The latter exercises overall responsibility for the administration of Parliament.⁹

3. Institutional balancing act: neutrality, permanence and independence

The Secretary General holds a unique institutional position, acting as a liaison between the administrative and political spheres. The role requires not only managerial and technical skills, but also a keen understanding of the political dynamics inherent in parliamentary work.

This position exposes the officeholder, as well as the parliamentary administration he heads, to a number of structural constraints.

⁶ Regulations of the Parliamentary Services of 16 May 2014.

⁷ The masculine form used always refers to both men and women. We have chosen not to use multiple designations for the sake of clarity.

⁸ Parliamentary Services' 2022+ Strategy of 17 October 2022. The new strategy will be finalised by the end of 2026.

⁹ Art. 38 para. 2 ParlA.

3.1. Neutrality and impartiality in a politicised environment

The Secretary General operates in an environment characterised by politicised debates and shifting power dynamics. In the face of political pressure, the Secretary General must demonstrate strict impartiality. It is his responsibility to treat all members of Parliament equally and to avoid becoming a tool for partisan interests. His credibility rests above all on his skill and professionalism. To be able to advise members of Parliament effectively, he must, of course, have a thorough understanding of the workings of politics and the dynamics of influence between parties, while maintaining the necessary distance to carry out his duties. The Secretary General does not interfere in the political substance of parliamentary business but ensures that procedures are followed correctly and impartially. The Secretary General may be a member of a professional organisation or a political party but does not take a public stance on their behalf. Generally speaking, he exercises his freedom of expression in a manner consistent with his role and shows restraint.

3.2. Permanence and adaptability in the face of political instability

In a parliamentary context characterised by shifting majorities and unpredictable decisions, the Secretary General is a pillar of institutional stability. His role is essential in ensuring the continuity of the institution,¹⁰ regardless of political shifts or changes in the parliamentary majority. He ensures the legal certainty of the procedures applied in Parliament, in accordance with both statutory and unwritten law.¹¹ As the guardian of the institution's institutional memory, he preserves and passes on parliamentary traditions and customs, thereby reinforcing the institution's stability in the face of political upheavals and changes in personnel. This stability goes hand in hand with the need to adapt, enabling the organisation to respond swiftly to unforeseen situations and meet new challenges, particularly in the areas of digital transformation and the integration of artificial intelligence. In certain situations, it is also a matter of preventing attempts to circumvent procedures, which may be justified by the legitimacy associated with holding a majority share of power.

3.3. Independence and the separation of powers

The independence of the Parliamentary Services, headed by the Secretary General, is a corollary of the principle of the separation of powers. This independence from the government enables Parliament to exercise its legislative and supervisory powers to the full (Arts 169–170 Cst.), without being dependent on the Federal Administration. It strengthens the legislature's ability to compete with the often more structured expertise of the executive, thereby contributing to the democratic balance of power ('checks and balances').

4. Selection and appointment procedure: ensuring competence and legitimacy

The procedure for appointing the Secretary General is largely shaped by the specific nature of the responsibilities entrusted to him. It is designed to ensure that the holder of the post has the requisite professional skills, administrative impartiality and institutional legitimacy.

¹⁰ The report supporting the revision of the Parliament Act states that "the Parliamentary Services (...) are also mandated to work actively and on their own initiative to safeguard and promote the interests of Parliament as an institution, as well as the interests of its bodies." (Report of the National Council's Political Institutions Committee in support of the draft Parliament Act, 1 March 2001, FF **2001** 3397).

¹¹ See, for example, the compilation of decisions and practices of the Office of the National Council, dated 23 August 2024.

The Secretary General is selected following an open recruitment process. This ensures equal treatment of internal and external candidates and guarantees the transparency of the procedure, prioritising professional skills regardless of any partisan considerations. Selection is based on an assessment of applications and interviews, supplemented by in-depth assessments. In practice, however, internal candidates (from the parliamentary administration) have a comparative advantage, owing to their knowledge of procedures and how the institution operates. In this regard, it is telling that the last four Secretaries General appointed since the early 1990s have all come from within the parliamentary administration.

The appointment follows an election by the Offices of both chambers, followed by confirmation by the Federal Assembly. The Secretary General is the only member of the parliamentary administration whose appointment is subject to a formal decision by Parliament, taken by secret ballot.

This method of appointment strengthens the Secretary General's legitimacy and authority within the institution. Appointed for the duration of the parliamentary term (four years), his term of office is generally renewed, thereby ensuring administrative continuity.

From this perspective, the appointment procedure is not to be understood as a mere formal mechanism for selecting candidates, but as an institutional framework designed to ensure that an individual's profile is suited to a structurally defined role. Its aim is less to assign a role than to select the person best suited to fulfil a role already determined by the needs of the parliamentary system.

As such, the appointment of the Secretary General does not create the post: it reveals what the post demands.

5. Conclusion: A discreet yet strategic player in parliamentary governance

The Secretary General of the Swiss Parliament, although not very visible on the political scene, plays a central role within the political and institutional framework. Through his work, he contributes to Parliament's organisational efficiency, the legal certainty of its legislative activity and the continuity of its institutional functioning. By ensuring that procedures are followed, that legislative work is prepared to a high standard, and that the Assembly's bodies are coordinated, he plays a direct role in ensuring the robustness and consistency of parliamentary legislation.

In addition to these functions, he also plays a key role in maintaining institutional stability. In a political environment characterised by shifting majorities and changing power dynamics, the parliamentary administration he heads provides a sense of continuity. He preserves the institution's institutional memory and ensures the transmission of practices, expertise and procedural rules that enable Parliament to function in an orderly and predictable manner.

So, although the Secretary General carries out his duties relatively discreetly and tends to remain behind the political scene, he occupies a strategic position at the heart of the parliamentary system. By striking a balance between administrative neutrality and the demands of the political process, he contributes to the smooth functioning of Parliament as an institution and, more broadly, to the quality of democratic governance.

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