



The Parliament Building in Bern









Welcome to the
Parliament Building!



DID YOU KNOW?

You may be familiar with the building under another name, the 'Federal Palace'. However, that actually refers to a complex comprising three buildings: the Parliament Building in the centre, flanked by the east and west wings of the Federal Palace. All in all, the complex stretches over a length of more than 300 metres. The central and most architecturally striking part, the Parliament Building, with its imposing dome, was the last element to be added in 1902 and has since been the seat of the Swiss parliament.

In September 2023, to mark the 175th anniversary of the Federal Constitution, a mosaic was installed on the gable of the Parliament Building's north façade. This artwork consists of 246 triangular tiles, representing the 200 seats in the National Council and the 46 seats in the Council of States. The work is named 'Tilo' in honour of Tilo Frey, a politician from Neuchâtel who, in 1971, became one of the first women to be elected to the National Council. Tilo Frey was also the first woman of African descent to serve in Parliament.

Visitors' Entrance

The display case by the visitors' entrance contains a faithful replica of the Federal Constitution of 1848, the Swiss legal system's supreme law. It sets out key principles, such as the rights and duties of citizens and the basic structure of the state, and it transformed Switzerland from a loose confederation of independent cantons into a modern federal state.

The large map behind the reception desk is the Dufour Map drawn up in the mid-19th century. It is named after Guillaume Henri Dufour, who, as a general of the Swiss Confederation and head of the National Survey, was responsible for producing the map. At a scale of 1:100,000, it is the first official map of the whole of Switzerland. Thanks to its precise and detailed depiction, the Dufour Map is regarded as a work of national importance.



What would you like to include in the constitution?





DID YOU KNOW?

The Dufour map at the visitors' entrance is not an original. In 2015, as part of a one-time project, swisstopo staff reprinted the map using the old method with the 25 original copper plates.



North Entrance

The Parliament Building was constructed between 1894 and 1902 under the supervision of the St Gallen architect Hans Wilhelm Auer. The project involved 175 companies and 33 artists from across Switzerland. 97 per cent of the materials used were sourced domestically. By using various types of stone sourced within the country, the architect sought to ensure that all parts of Switzerland were represented. The extensive artistic design of the building's façades and interior was intended to reflect the history of the country, the federal state and Switzerland's cultural diversity.



Could you imagine serving as
a member of Parliament yourself?





DID YOU KNOW?

The statues of bears serve as a reminder that Switzerland's political life converges here in Bern, and that the construction of the Federal Palace was made possible thanks to the generosity of the city. The bear is the heraldic animal of the city of Bern.

Domed Hall

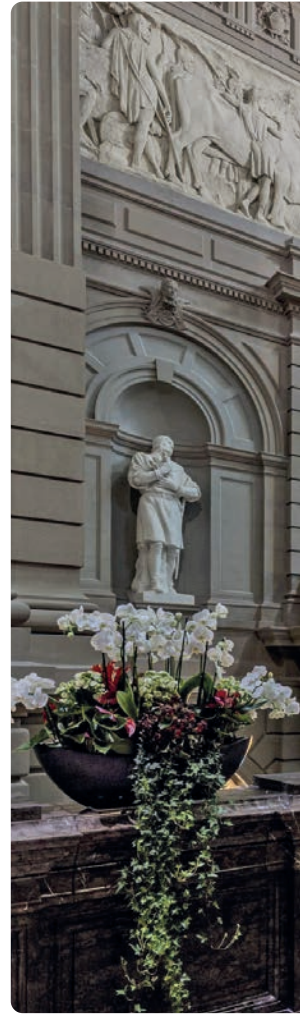


What do you think is
typically Swiss?



The imposing, 24-tonne monument to the 'Three Confederates' is immediately striking. The work by the artist James André Vibert depicts the legendary figures of Werner Stauffacher (Schwyz), Walter Fürst (Uri) and Arnold von Melchtal (Unterwalden) swearing the oath at the Rütli, the mythical founding act of the Swiss Confederation.





The four men-at-arms stand as an honour guard before the Three Confederates. They represent Switzerland's four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh.

Have you ever noticed the ceremonial loggia opposite the statue of the 'Three Confederates'? It is primarily decorative in nature. At the same time, this balcony symbolically highlights the important role of the people as the sovereign power in a direct democracy.



On either side of the ceremonial loggia stand two sculptures by Hugo Siegwart, which embody key virtues of statehood: On the left is the national hero Arnold Winkelried, symbolising self-sacrifice, and on the right is the hermit Niklaus von der Flüe, symbolising peace and reconciliation. Switzerland's early history is depicted on the north wall of the domed hall: Adolf Meyer's 15-metre-long plaster relief depicts the arrival of our forebears in the country and highlights the fact that the Swiss people are descended from different ethnic groups.



Finally, the four large arched windows depict scenes from working life in the textile industry, agriculture, trade and transport, and the metal industry – the most important economic sectors at the end of the 19th century.

In the centre of the glass dome is a mosaic featuring the Swiss cross and the Latin inscription 'Unus pro omnibus – omnes pro uno' ('One for all – all for one'), Switzerland's unofficial political motto. The 22 cantonal coats of arms are arranged around the mosaic.



DID YOU KNOW?

Surely there should be 26 cantons? Correct. The six 'half-cantons' have been depicted here as three full cantons. However, one canton is still missing – Jura, which was not established until 1978. However, if you look closely at the domed hall's vaulted ceiling, you are sure to spot the coat of arms that was added later.



Council of States chamber





The representatives of the cantons meet in the Council of States chamber, sometimes known as the ‘small chamber’. As a rule, each canton sends two Council members. An exception to this are the former half-cantons, such as Appenzell Ausser-rhoden and Basel-Landschaft, each of which is represented by just one person.

The Council presidency is assumed by a different member each year. This person chairs the debates and heads the Council Office and represents the Council in its external relations.

The three-week ordinary sessions of the two chambers are held four times a year, in March, June, September and December.

The Council members, who are elected by the people for a four-year term, deliberate on and pass federal laws, subject to the rights of the people and the cantons to participate in the legislative process (referendum, popular initiative).

Under the Federal Constitution, the National Council and the Council of States have the same legislative powers and handle the same items of business. However, this does not mean that the two councils are identical. The differences are evident as soon as you reach the cloakroom: every member of the Council of States has their own coat hook with a nameplate. Members of the National Council, on the other hand, have only anonymous coat hangers at their disposal. In the Council of States, male members must wear a tie, whereas there are no specific dress code requirements in the National Council. Unlike in the National Council, speeches in the Council of States are not interpreted simultaneously into the three official languages. Furthermore, there is no time limit on members addressing the Council of States, and each member speaks from their seat.



**What law would you like
to introduce in Switzerland?**

In Switzerland, direct democracy originally took the form of the 'Landsgemeinde' (People's Assembly), as depicted in the large fresco in the chamber by Albert Welti and Wilhelm Balmer. In the cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Glarus, this form of open-air assembly still exists today.

The golden dates in the spandrels refer to key events in Swiss history, such as the founding of the modern federal state in 1848 and the introduction of women's suffrage in 1971.

Would you like to attend a Council debate?

If so, you can book a seat in the gallery at **www.parl.ch**



DID YOU KNOW?

The chandelier weighs 1.5 tonnes and has 208 bulbs. It is one of the very first electric chandeliers ever made. The Parliament Building was fully electrified when it was inaugurated in 1902, which was a sensation at the time and considered a great luxury.





National Council chamber





The Swiss parliament consists of two chambers: the National Council, whose 200 members represent the Swiss population, and the Council of States, whose 46 members represent the cantons. The two chambers have equal status and handle the same items of business in accordance with the same procedure. For a law to come into force, it must be passed by both chambers in identical wording. Proceedings are chaired by the Council president. At the start of the winter session, each council elects one of its members to this post for a one-year term. In the National Council chamber, it is easy to see where the president sits: on the elaborately decorated seat in the centre of the podium.

The National Council chamber also hosts the sessions of the United Federal Assembly. The seats for members of the Council of States are located around the rear wall of the chamber. They are only used when the two chambers sit in joint session to elect members of the Federal Council, members of the federal courts, the Federal Chancellor and – in the event of war – a general to head the armed forces. Following the creation of the canton of Jura in 1978, two additional seats were installed on the west side of the chamber for its Council of States representatives.



What idea would you like
to bring to Parliament?

This majestic work by the Geneva-based artist Charles Giron depicts Lake Lucerne and the 'Cradle of the Confederation', the Rütli meadow, from a bird's-eye view. It is said that in 1291, the three Confederates took their oath on this lakeside meadow – at the front left of the picture – thereby founding Switzerland. In the background you can see the striking peaks of the Grosser and Kleiner Mythen, and the town of Schwyz below. In the white cloud above the lake sits an angel of peace holding a golden olive branch.

The monumental painting is flanked by two imposing sculptures. In the niche on the left stands a statue of Switzerland's national hero William Tell, symbolising political freedom and action. In the niche on the right stands a statue of Gertrud Stauffacher, who embodies the noble idea of the Swiss Confederation. It was she who is said to have suggested that the three valleys of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden join together to form a Confederation. Above the mural, a frieze runs around the entire chamber featuring the coats of arms of 59 towns and cities of particular importance around 1902.



Council debates are open to the public; guests are welcome to use the large public gallery.

The debates are also streamed live on the Swiss Parliament's website **www.parl.ch**.



DID YOU KNOW?

On the left, on the topmost grass-covered ledge, you can make out a fish. A fish in the rock face? The date of the painting's unveiling – 1 April 1902 – seems to have inspired the artist to play an April Fool's joke. The fish is said to be a reminder of the old French custom of putting live or dead fish into people's pockets on 1 April.

Lobby





What are your hopes for Switzerland's future?

The lobby is 44 metres long and, with its curved shape, lends the impression of great depth. This is where Council members meet and hold discussions during sessions, give interviews and receive lobbyists. It is also used for official functions, such as state receptions hosted by the Federal Council.

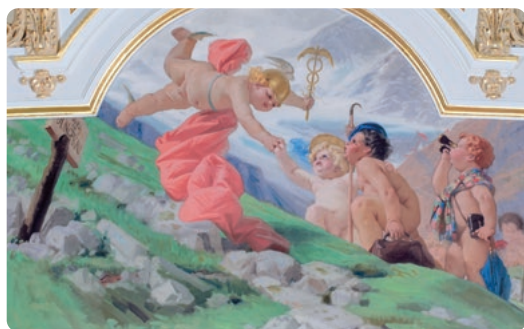
The ceiling paintings are by the Ticino artist Antonio Barzaghi-Cattaneo. The six most important civic virtues are depicted allegorically in the middle row of the cartouches: truth, wisdom, patriotism, fertility, charity and justice. The paintings on the inner and outer sides of the ceiling depict the main trades and industries around 1900: on the inside, these include black-smithing, shoemaking, tourism, baking and construction; on the other, natural sciences, the arts, education, agriculture, and the watch and music box industries.





What qualities or values are important to you today?

The lobby is a real gem of the Belle Époque, the term used to describe the light, airy, artistic style typical of the period around 1900. However, the playful and bright atmosphere is the product of meticulous craftsmanship. The ceiling is adorned with impressive, colourful stucco, the door frames are of genuine marble, and the walls are clad in stucco marble, a painted imitation of marble known as 'stucco lustro'.



DID YOU KNOW?

The painter Antonio Barzaghi Cattaneo often infused his works with humour. This is particularly evident in a painting on tourism from around 1900: a representative of the Swiss tourism industry descends into the valley from the Jungfrau massif to welcome visitors dressed as the god Mercury. The visitors, too, are portrayed with plenty of irony and clichés – such as a red-haired Englishman with an umbrella, a Frenchman in a beret and a blond-haired German in a straw hat.

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