The Swiss Parliament

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How Parliament functions

Switzerland's parliament has two chambers: the National Council, which represents the people, and the Council of States, which represents the cantons. A particular feature of the Swiss parliament is that the two chambers debate items of business on an equal footing and have the same competences and roles (so there is no upper and lower house as is usually the case elsewhere). Parliament holds four sessions a year – in March, June, September and December – each lasting three weeks.

Members of Parliament are elected for a four-year term. Due to the fact that Parliament does not sit all year round, most exercise another occupation.

Since 1963, the National Council has been composed of 200 members. Seats are allotted to the 26 cantons on the basis of their resident population. At present, each member of the National Council represents around 45,000 people. Since 1919, members have been elected by a system of proportional representation.

The 46 members of the Council of States are directly elected. Obwalden, Nidwalden, Basel-Stadt, Basel-Landschaft, Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Appenzell Innerrhoden each have one representative, while all other cantons have two.

In the National Council, 39 per cent of members are women; in the Council of States the figure is 35 per cent. The average age of council members is 50 in the National Council and 56 in the Council of States. The cost per head of population of running Parliament is CHF 13 a year.

Roles

The main role of Parliament is to enact legislation. In addition, it ratifies international agreements, approves the federal budget and the state accounts, exercises oversight over the Federal Administration and elects the members of the Federal Council and the federal courts.

Committees

Parliamentary instruments

A large share of the work of Parliament is carried out in the nine specialist committees, which prepare items of business for debate in the National Council and the Council of States. Each committee is responsible for a specific topic, such as legal affairs, transport, education, security and foreign policy. The finance committee oversees the federal finances and the control committee supervises the activities of the Federal Council and the Administration.

Committees in the Council of States have 13 members; those in the National Council have 25. Their meetings are confidential so that views can be expressed freely. The composition of the committees is determined by the size of the parliamentary groups, which are groups of members of a particular party or of parties with similar political leanings.

Members of Parliament, committees and parliamentary groups have various instruments at their disposal in the form of postulates, motions and parliamentary initiatives. They may use these instruments to seek a change to the Constitution or law, or to request a report on a specific matter. A request or interpellation can be submitted to obtain information from the Federal Council.

From idea
to federal act

The impetus for a new piece of legislation comes from the public, the Federal Administration or Parliament. The Federal Council prepares a bill and submits it to the cantons, political parties, associations and other interested parties for consultation. It revises the bill based on the results of the consultation and then submits it to Parliament in the form of a dispatch.

The Presiding Colleges of the National Council and the Council of States then set the parliamentary process in motion by designating one of the two Councils as 'first chamber' to address the bill. The relevant specialist committee examines the bill and submits proposals to its Council. If the Council decides to introduce the bill, it debates the individual legal provisions and votes on the whole bill.

The committee of the second chamber then examines the bill and submits its proposals. If the second chamber decides to introduce the bill, it too debates the individual legal provisions and votes on the whole bill.

If the two Councils fail to reach agreement, the bill goes through a procedure to resolve the differences. The committee of the first chamber debates the points on which they disagree and submits a proposal to its Council. If there are still unresolved differences, these are addressed first by the committee of the second chamber and then by the Council. On rare occasions when no resolution has been reached after three sets of deliberation, a conciliation conference is held between the committees from each chamber.

A bill only becomes law once it has been passed by both Councils in the final vote. If it is not approved by both Councils, it is abandoned.

Federal acts are subject to an optional referendum; if 50,000 signatures opposing the bill are collected within 100 days, it is put to a public vote.
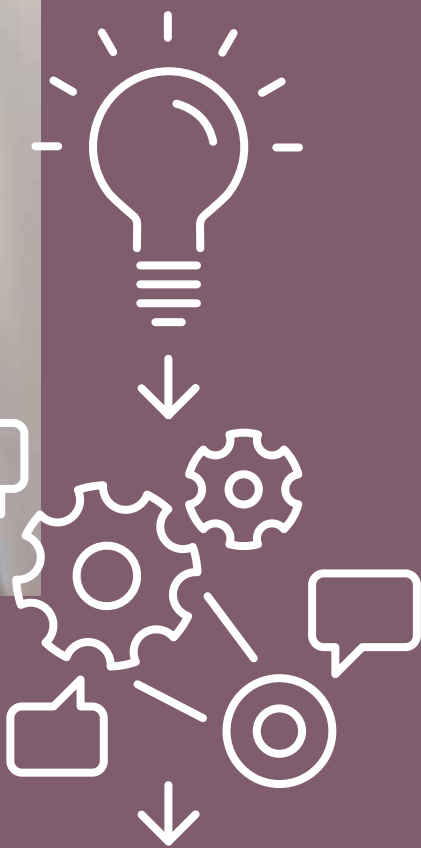
Parliament is
an open house

Switzerland has a system of direct democracy. This means that the voting population is the sovereign power and has the last word at all levels of government and on all matters. For this system to work there needs to be openness and transparency. This is why parliamentary debates are open to the public and can be streamed live or after the event from the archives. Votes are held electronically in both Councils.

When a bill is debated in session, it has already passed through a lengthy process and undergone preliminary examination in committee and parliamentary groups.

In the National Council, rapporteurs report on the work of their committee from the speaker's rostrum. Depending on the importance of the item of business, persons submitting a motion, group spokespersons and individual speakers may then address the chamber. A member of the Federal Council is also present and may speak at any time. The statements are interpreted simultaneously into the three official languages: German, French and Italian.

The members of the Council of States speak from their seats. There is no limit on speaking time, which allows for more comprehensive debate. There is no simultaneous interpretation in this chamber because it is assumed that those present have the necessary language skills. The federal councillor responsible for the item of business is also present.

Parliament Building

The Parliament Building was designed by architect Hans Wilhelm Auer and inaugurated in 1902. It is not only the seat of the Parliament, but also a national monument bringing together Switzerland's different regions and population groups under one roof.

This is also illustrated by the layout of the central domed hall in the form of a Swiss cross. The imposing statue of the Three Confederates by James André Vibert depicts the swearing of the oath of allegiance in 1291. The four soldiers framing the statue represent the four national languages.

On the other side of the hall are further decorative features symbolising Swiss history including a plaster relief depicting the origins of the Swiss people based on the legend of the forefathers' arrival as told in Schiller's 'William Tell'. Statues of Niklaus von der Flüe, to the right, and Arnold Winkelried, to the left of the mural, represent reconciliation and self-sacrifice.

A glance upwards to the glass dome also reveals a Swiss cross, surrounded by 22 cantonal coats of arms and the motto 'One for all, all for one'. Slightly below that is the coat of arms of the canton of Jura, which was founded in 1978. The arched stained-glass windows depict typical scenes from the main regional industries around 1900.

The mural in the National Council chamber was painted by Charles Giron. It shows the Rütli meadow by Lake Lucerne, traditionally believed to be the birthplace of the Swiss Confederation. In the niche on the left, a statue of William Tell symbolises political freedom and action; the statue of Gertrud Stauffacher in the niche on the right symbolises wisdom. Above the painting, and running around the hall, are the coats of arms of the 59 most populous communes of the time.

When Parliament sits in joint session as the United Federal Assembly to elect members of the Federal Council and federal judges, the members of the Council of States take their places on the seats along the curved rear wall of the chamber.

The fresco in the chamber of the Council of States was painted by Albert Welti and depicts a People's Assembly from the 18th century. The nine dates in gold refer to key events in the history of the Swiss constitution, including the Federal Charter of the three founding cantons in 1291 and the adoption of the first Federal Constitution in 1848 to the two complete revisions in 1874 and 1999.
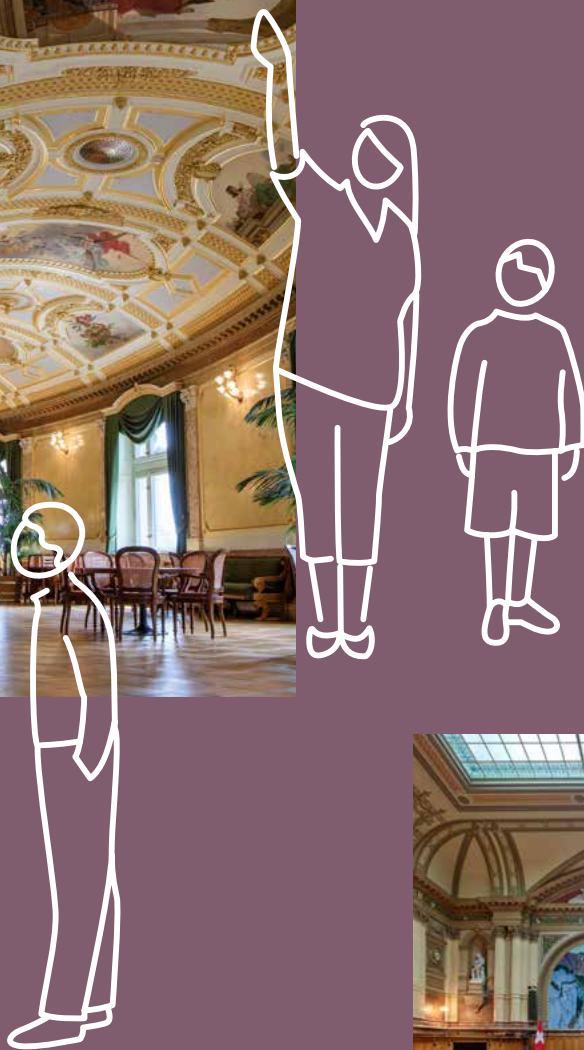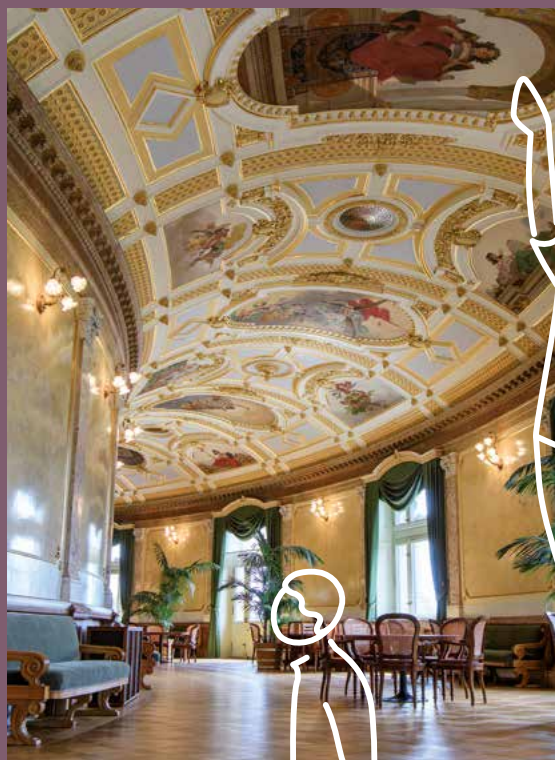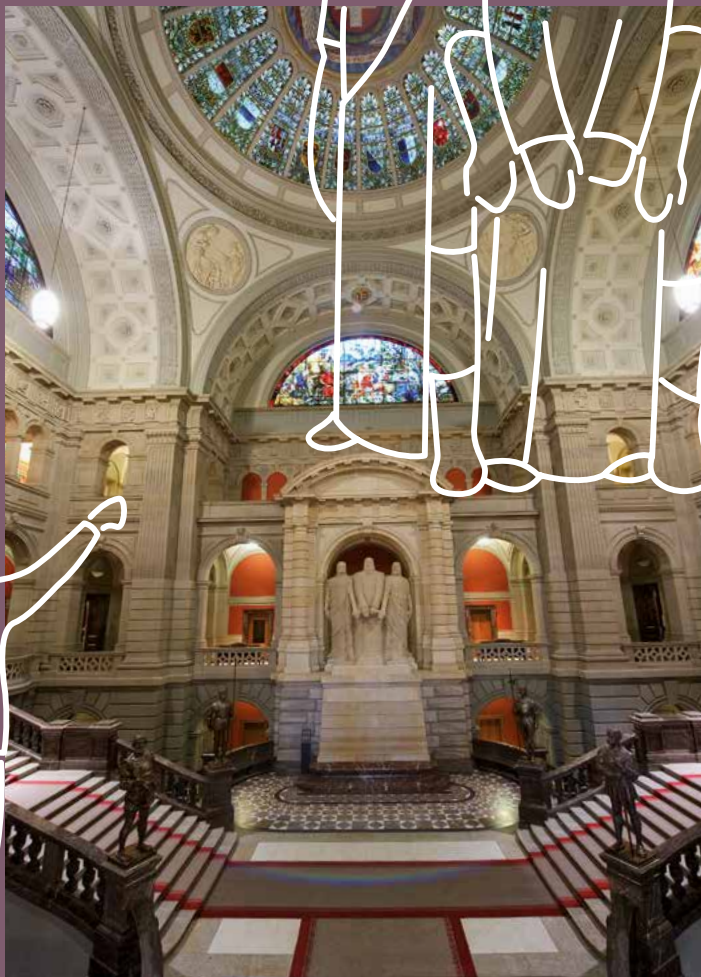
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