



As seen from the public gallery

The public session of Parliament marks the end of a long preparatory period for an item of parliamentary business, carried out collectively by various parliamentary bodies (committees and parliamentary parties) and by each individual member of the Council.

In the National Council, the two rapporteurs of the committee have taken their places on the right-hand side of the rostrum. They give account, in both German and French, of the work of the committee, which has made a detailed study of the text under discussion. The rapporteurs present the recommendations made by the relevant committee, which are also provided in printed form, and respond to the amendment proposals presented by members of the Council.

The Federal Councillor responsible for the dossier under discussion is seated on a special seat reserved for members of the Federal Council, and presents the opinions of the government.

In view of the growing number of items of business, the regulations provide for five categories of debate. These range from general discussion to written proceedings. This allows the work of the National Council to be carried out more efficiently and ensures that the available discussion time is free for the most important business. The National Council chamber is equipped with an electronic voting system.

In the Council of States there is only one committee rapporteur and no rostrum. Each member of the Council of States speaks from their own seat. There is no time limit for speeches. This leads to more spontaneity in the debate. The Council of States chamber is equipped with an electronic voting system.

The Parliament Building

The Parliament Building was constructed according to the plans of architect Hans Wilhelm Auer and was completed in 1902.

The Domed Hall between the two chambers features many historical symbols from Swiss history.

James André Vibert's sculpture "The Three Confederates" shows Werner Stauffacher, Walter Fürst and Arnold von Melchtal swearing the oath of union in 1291. Four soldiers are posted at each corner of the stairs, symbolising each of the four national languages.

Opposite the Three Confederates is a relief depicting the legend of the origin of the Swiss as told in Friedrich Schiller's "Wilhelm Tell". In the niches stand Winkelried and Nicholas von Flüe, symbolising self sacrifice and conciliation respectively.

The glass dome displays the coats of arms of 22 cantons surrounded by the motto "One for all and all for one". The coat of arms of the canton Jura is separate, with the date of accession (1978). The four windows show the regions of Switzerland and their principal economic activities. The medallions in the dome were designed by Antonio Soldini, who was once a member of the National Council, and symbolise Defence, Justice, Education and Public Works.

The National Council is dominated by a large wall painting by Charles Giron showing the Rütli meadow, the cradle of the Confederation, with the two Mythen peaks in the background.

Statues of Stauffacher's wife and William Tell are to the right and left of the wall painting, above which is a mural showing the saga which relates the deeds of

the forefathers. The heraldic arms of the 59 most important communes are arranged by canton to form a frieze.

Along the curved back wall are seats resembling choir-stalls for the members of the Council of States who come across to the National Council chamber for sessions of the United Federal Assembly, in particular when the Federal Council and federal judges are elected.

The chamber of the Council of States is decorated with a picture of the Nidwalden "Landsgemeinde" (outdoor meeting of citizens). The large chandelier is made up of 208 lamps. The following dates refer to important events in the constitutional history of Switzerland:

1 August 1291	Oldest Charter
7 October 1370	Priest's Charter
10 July 1393	Charter of Sempach
22 December 1481	Charter of Stans
19 February 1803	Act of Mediation
7 August 1815	Federal Treaty
12 September 1848	First Federal Constitution
29 May 1874	First total revision of the Constitution
18 April 1999	Second total revision of the Constitution



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The Swiss Parliament

The Swiss Parliament or Federal Assembly consists of two chambers with identical powers.

The National Council consists of 200 members. Each canton forms a constituency. Seats are allotted in proportion to the resident population of each canton. There has been a system of proportional representation since 1919. The Council of States has two members for each canton, a total of 46 members. Most cantons elect their members using the majority system (with the exception of the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel). Elections take place every four years. Elected members retain their usual jobs. Parliament meets four times a year for a three-week session. The cost of Parliament amounts to about 13 francs per head of the population and per annum. 64 women are members of the National Council and 6 women sit in the Council of States.

Main powers of the Federal Assembly

- To enact legislation (constitution and laws, approval of international treaties)
- To exercise oversight (supervision of the federal administration, approval of the annual budget and accounts)
- To conduct elections (members of the Federal Council and of the Federal Supreme Court, head of the armed forces in case of war)

Committees

The decisions taken by Parliament are initially drafted by twelve standing committees: finance – control – foreign affairs – science, education and culture – social security and health – environment, spatial planning and energy – security policy – transport and telecommunications – economic affairs and taxation – political institutions – legal affairs.

The Federal Assembly is represented in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the EFTA Parliamentary Committee, the International Assembly of French-speaking Parliaments (APF), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

Procedural form of demands or requests for action or for information

Members of Parliament can submit amendments to draft bills during debates. They can also table proposals in the form of parliamentary initiatives, motions and postulates. They can question the government by means of an interpellation or of a question.



How a new law comes about?

- 1 The Federal Council prepares a draft bill after consultation with the federal administration, the parties, the cantons and interested groups. This draft is then submitted to Parliament in the form of a report or dispatch.
- 2 The committee of the first Chamber (e.g. the National Council) studies the draft and submits its proposals to the Chamber.
- 3 If the first Chamber approves the introduction of the bill, it discusses the individual provisions and holds a vote on the whole bill.
- 4 It is then studied by the committee of the second Chamber (in this case the Council of States), which in turn submits its proposals.
- 5 If the second Chamber approves the introduction of the bill, it discusses the individual provisions and holds a vote on the whole bill.
- 6 If the Chambers disagree on one or more points, the bill moves back and forth until agreement is reached (resolution of differences).
- 7 The National Council resolves one difference but stands firm on another point.
- 8 The Council of States' committee proposes to accept the National Council's decision.



- 9 The Council of States resolves the last difference. If differences remain after three deliberations in each Chamber, a Conciliation Committee is called upon to suggest a possible compromise solution acceptable to both Chambers.
- 10 Both chambers then proceed separately to a final vote.
- 11 The law is subject to an optional referendum (50 000 signatures gathered within 100 days).
- 12 Once the bill has been approved, in a popular vote if one is requested, the law is published and comes into force.

1
Federal Council

2 / 6

Committee of the first Chamber

5 / 9

Council of States

10 / 11

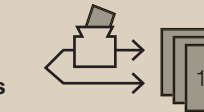
National Council
Council of States

3 / 7

National Council

4 / 8

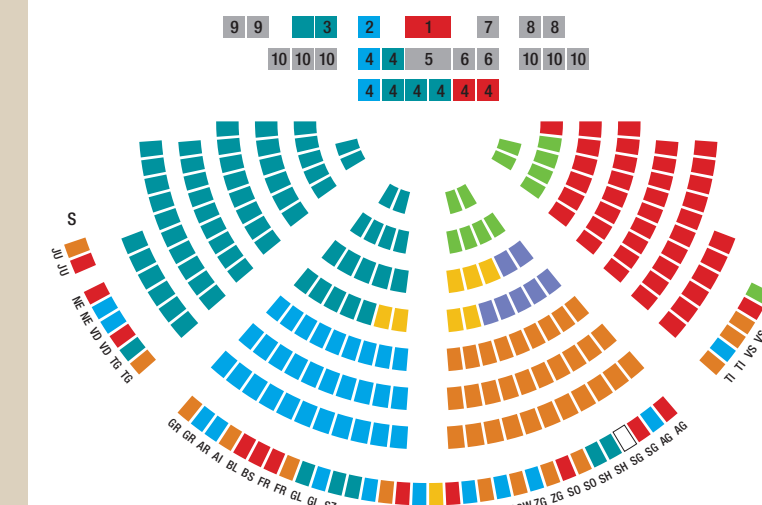
Committee of the second Chamber



National Council

Swiss People's Party	68
Social Democrats	43
Parliamentary group FDP	33
Christian Democrats	30
Green group	12
Conservative Democrat group	7
Green liberal group	7
Total	200

- 1 President
- 2 First vice-president
- 3 Second vice-president
- 4 Tellers
- 5 Member speaking
- 6 Rapporteurs
- 7 Secretary General
- 8 Council's secretaries
- 9 Official Bulletin
- 10 Federal Councillors
- S Council of States



Council of States

Christian Democrats	13
Parliamentary group FDP	12
Social Democrats	12
Swiss People's Party	6
Green group	1
Conservative Democrat group	1
Vacant	1
Total	46

- 1 President
- 2 First vice-president
- 3 Second vice-president
- 4 Teller
- 5 Secretary
- 6 Interpreter
- 7 Official Bulletin
- 8 Federal Councillors

