Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 18 (1991)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The political structure of the Swiss Confederation. Part 1, A semi-direct democracy
Autor: Gueissaz, Anne
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907799

Nutzungsbedingungen
Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation
L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

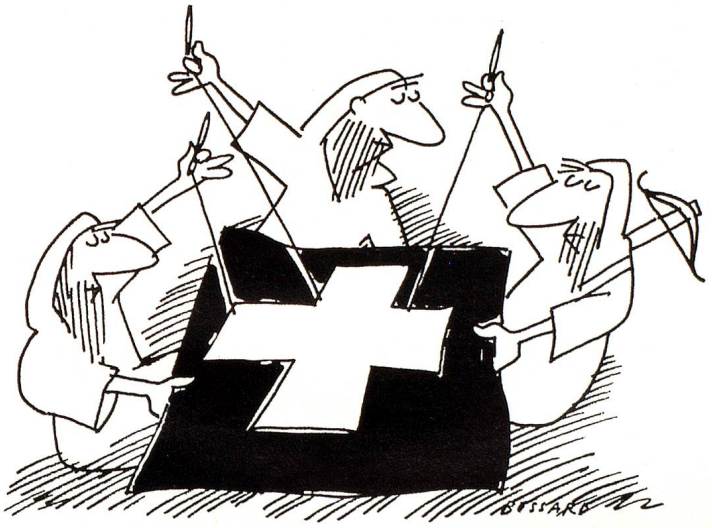
Download PDF: 29.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

The political structure of the Swiss Confederation (1)

A Semi-Direct Democracy

On 22 March this year the Swiss Parliament approved the law enabling Swiss citizens living abroad to vote by post from some time next year. This is the first of a series of articles aimed at familiarising you with the Swiss state and its history and institutions and explaining how it functions.



(Graphic: Hugo Bossard)

The Swiss Confederation is a state, i.e. a permanent association of people of a specific area under a supreme authority. Although many of us may now think this is something to be taken for granted, it must not be forgotten that it was by no means always so and that the Confederates had to fight hard for it.

A brief stroll through the centuries

When the men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden came together on the Rütli meadow in 1291 to swear their «everlasting alliance» they had no idea that they were laying the foundations of what was to become the Swiss Confederation. The original aim of the alliance was only to join together to protect their sovereignty against the territorial claims of the Habsburg dynasty and to settle internal disputes themselves without the intervention of outside judges.

Subsequently other localities – valley communities and towns – joined the alliance, which by 1513 had grown into the Confederation of the Thirteen Cantons. The foremost purpose of this *loose federation of states* was the joint defence of their independence and the conquest of new territories. But for a long time internal disagreements among the aristocratic town and the democratic rural cantons and between the Protestant and Catholic cantons prevented their own common policy being forged.

Only under Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century did the loose federation of states become a unitary state (the Helvetic Republic), which, however, collapsed after the fall of the French Emperor.

The decisive step from a loose federation of states to a *federal state* did not take place until 1848, following the victory of the Protestant, liberal cantons over the conservative Catholic cantons which had come out in favour of the old Confederation.

In 1848 a single federal constitution was adopted by plebiscite. Not many years afterwards – in 1874 – it underwent a complete revision. Since then it has been constantly adapted to circumstances and since 1967 work on a total revision of our constitution has been going on.

Democracy

Under the federal constitution Switzerland is a republic, in contrast to a monarchy in which in principle only a single ruler and a small section of the people make the final decisions. Republics are all non-monarchical types of state, including democracies. Thus, in Switzerland decisions can be made either by *direct democracy* (by voting at the open-air gatherings known as Landsgemeinden or at the polling booth) or through the system of *representative democracy.* In the former system the electorate votes directly to decide material questions or choose their executive authorities and in the latter this is done through representatives elected by the people. The present-day Confederation is a *semi-direct democracy,* i.e. a combination of both systems (see forthcoming article).

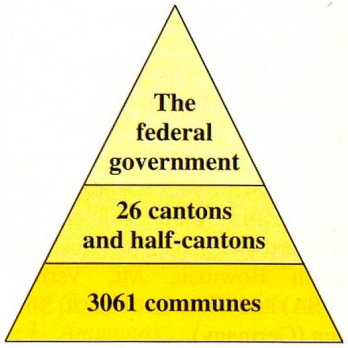
Federalism

The Confederation is also a three-tier federal state (see box). Unlike centralised states, in which decisions are usually made by the central government, the federal state is regarded as a community of partners which, although recognising a central government, also wish to retain their individuality as far as possible.

Present-day Switzerland consists of 26 sovereign cantons and half cantons. The federal structure allows them a considerable degree of freedom of decision and administrative autonomy. Before the creation of the federal state in 1848 the cantons were responsible for all functions which belong to a state proper. Now, although subordinate to the federal government, they carry out all the duties of a state which are not expressly reserved to the federal authorities, i.e. the central government. Thus each canton also has its own constitution and its own laws.

In its next issue the «Swiss Revue» will deal with the apportionment of duties between the federal government, the cantons and the communes.

However, the federal government as the uppermost tier may only exercise the powers expressly transferred to it under the federal constitution (and thus by the people and the cantons).

Unlike the cantons, the more than 3000 communes, which make up the third tier, cannot be described as states. Nevertheless, they are not mere administrative districts subordinate to the cantons but also have their own autonomy and spheres of activity. Within this autonomy they are free to legislate to meet regional and local needs.

GUA/Service for the Swiss Abroad