

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 23 (1996)  
**Heft:** 1

**Artikel:** Switzerland and its cantons : federalism as the pillar of Switzerland's identity  
**Autor:** Miéville, Daniel-S.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907728>

### **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:** 17.04.2026

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

Switzerland and its cantons

# Federalism as the pillar of Swiss identity

**26 cantons equals 26 school and tax systems, 26 criminal codes, 26 political orders. Federalism is the central component of the way Switzerland sees itself. It is a bulwark against the much-scorned centralism and at present may be making a comeback.**

**O**n September 22, 1985, Swiss voters approved a bill to standardise the beginning of the school year by a majority of three to two. It was a question which had been causing controversy for a long time and which had

Daniel-S. Miéville \*

already been the subject of several parliamentary initiatives. At a time when the question of mobility was much in the air the fact that the school year started in one place in the autumn and in another in spring was a serious and anachronistic obstacle to the freedom of movement of families with children of school age. The people of Berne and Zurich had voted against aligning themselves with the rest of the country, and therefore the voters of Switzerland as a whole were called upon to settle the matter.

This was quite exceptional. A referendum result forced the cantons to march together in a sphere where each one of them was and still is very largely sovereign. This is how federalism works. It is one of the three pillars – the others being direct democracy and neutrality – on which the very identity of Swiss democracy is supported. A dramatic situation arose, and there was a huge row, when the people of Appenzell-Outer Rhodes had to be forced to accept

\* Daniel-S. Miéville is home affairs correspondent of Journal de Genève and Gazette de Lausanne.

the right of women to vote at the cantonal level. It was a combat between two loyalties: to the constitution which guarantees equality of men and women and to the right of the cantons to organise themselves politically as they think fit. Appenzellers dealt with the matter themselves at the last minute by giving their women access to the Landsgemeinde.

When we talk of federalism in this country it is usually to deplore the natural tendency of the Swiss political system to gravitate towards centralism. It cannot be denied that such a force exists. But if we try to take a step backwards and look at these matters from a distance, Switzerland appears as a remarkable jigsaw in a very small area. We see cohabitation – in spite of surface uniformity – of as many education, legal, tax and institutional systems as there are cantons and half-cantons. It is true that the beginning of the school year has been standardised, but care has been taken not to go any further in this direction. Some would have liked to see harmonisation extended to the beginning and the duration of compulsory schooling. But each canton still maintains the specific features of its own school system.

How many people know that Switzerland possesses no fewer than 26 codes of criminal procedure? This certainly complicates the efficiency of legal proceedings involving several cantons. Only four cantons have so far voted by way of cantonal initiatives in favour of a unified criminal procedure.

In the same way each canton has its own tax system. A law on fiscal standardisation which was passed in 1993 gives the cantons eight years to make the necessary adjustments. But this merely means that by the year 2001 they will have to have standardised their systems. Although the method of paying taxes will then be the same, each canton will still be free to fix its rates as it thinks fit according to its needs. This will not eliminate the present competition between the cantons to attract the

Second reading of the federal elections of October 22, 1995

## Switzerland's political landscape

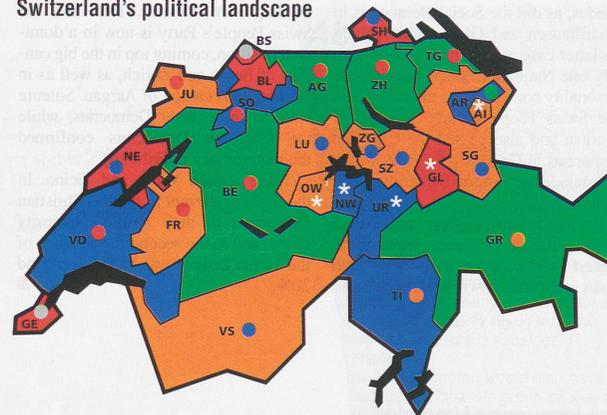
**In which regions of the country are the various parties strongest? After the initial analysis of the results of the parties in the National Council elections published in the last number, here is a geographical breakdown, mostly by canton.**

**I**f we colour in a map of Switzerland on the basis of the strongest party, we find that there is a "Jura curve" (extending from Basle to Geneva) which is essentially Social Democrat, except for Vaud and Canton Jura itself. Central Switzerland remains generally Christian Democrat, although other parties have

most wealthy taxpayers on to their territory.

Federalism may perhaps be rejuvenated by enabling the cantons to reconcile the very different ideas of their future expressed by the French-speaking and German-speaking regions. There is now talk of defusing the crisis caused by the refusal to change the Lex Friedrich – which regulates acquisition of property by persons resident abroad – by making its application subject to cantonal rather than federal law.

Switzerland's political landscape



Colour = Strongest party after the 1995 elections. Second strongest party marked by a spot within the main colour.  
 \* Cantons with majority voting (only 1 seat in the National Council).  
 Legend:  
 ■ Liberal Democratic Party  
 ■ Social Democratic Party  
 ■ Swiss People's Party  
 ■ Christian Democratic Party  
 ■ Liberal Party

in this area. So is the conservative though European bloc of the Liberals and in Jura the Christian Democrats – who were among the founding fathers of the new canton. This scenario was confirmed at the last election. The Social Democrats came out top in the cantons and half-cantons of Basle City (with a huge 10% jump in votes), Basle Rural, Neuchâtel and Geneva. The Liberal Democrats were top in Vaud (although the Social Democrats were only a few tenths of a point behind them); and the Christian Democrats were ahead in Jura, with the Social Democrats replacing the Liberal Democrats in second place.

Traditionally Catholic central Switzerland is in large majority Christian Democrat. Almost all the cantons of the Sonderbund – this refers to the brief civil war in 1847 – made up that region, grouped round the bastion of Lucerne. Last October Christian Democrat supremacy in Lucerne itself, Schwyz, Zug, Upper Unterwalden and even Uri –

if we consider the result for the Council of States – was confirmed. But for the first time in nearly a century the Liberal Democrats took Lower Unterwalden; and in Zug, Lucerne and Schwyz there was a strong advance (more than 10% in all of them) by the Swiss People's Party. But the latter was to the detriment of the Christian Democrats rather than the Liberal Democrats. Apparently a substantial part of the conservative electorate of these cantons no longer feels represented by the more traditional centre-right parties, particularly (but not only) on European integration.

In eastern Switzerland no party has any great advantage over the others, although here too the Swiss People's Party was the most successful in 1995, particularly in Appenzell and St. Gall. But in spite of their losses the Christian Democrats did remain on top in the important canton of St. Gall and – in accordance with tradition – in Appenzell-Outer Rhodes. The Liberal Democrats came out ahead in Appenzell-Outer

made considerable inroads. Eastern Switzerland is on the whole mixed. The region between Berne and the Rhine has a Swiss People's Party majority. Ticino

Giuseppe Rusconi

remains Liberal Democrat and Valais Christian Democrat.

Let us take a closer look, starting with the "Jura curve", i.e. that part of Switzerland which mainly borders on France and has a big city at either end, Basle and Geneva. It is a region which has good relations with its large neighbour and for this reason is not afraid of it in any way. The defensive attitude often found in regions neighbouring on Germany is completely absent. Traditionally, the Social Democrats and Liberal Democrats are well represented

|                                | ZH Zurich | BE Berne | LU Lucerne | UR Uri | SZ Schwyz | OW Upper Unterwalden |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|-----------|----------------------|
| Joined the Confederation:      | 1351      | 1353     | 1332       | 1291   | 1291      | 1291                 |
| Seat of government:            | Zurich    | Berne    | Lucerne    | Aldorf | Schwyz    | Sarnen               |
| Population in 1995 (in 1,000): | 1168.6    | 941.8    | 337.9      | 35.9   | 120.6     | 31.0                 |
| Foreign nationals (in 1,000):  | 239.7     | 102.5    | 47.3       | 3.0    | 18.2      | 3.2                  |
| Land area in km <sup>2</sup> : | 1729      | 5961     | 1494       | 1077   | 908       | 491                  |

|       | NW Lower Unterwalden | GL Glarus | ZG Zug   | FR Fribourg | SO Soleure | BS Basle City | BL Basle Rural |
|-------|----------------------|-----------|----------|-------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1291  | 1352                 | 1352      | 1481     | 1481        | 1501       | 1501          |                |
| Stans | Glarus               | Zug       | Fribourg | Soleure     | Basle      | Liestal       |                |
| 36.0  | 39.4                 | 90.4      | 222.2    | 237.3       | 197.1      | 251.3         |                |
| 3.0   | 8.1                  | 16.7      | 29.8     | 36.1        | 49.3       | 38.9          |                |
| 276   | 685                  | 239       | 1671     | 791         | 37         | 518           |                |