



Switzerland — Va-PoReg Country Report

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10/27/1848 Start Electoral Oligarchy (Patriarchal): The traditional founding of Switzerland is dated back to 1291. In the short-lived Helvetic Republic (1798-1803) men above the age of 20 had the right to vote. On 08/07/1815 a restoration of the Ancien Régime occurred, reverting the changes imposed by Napoleon Bonaparte. The emergence of Switzerland as a federal state commenced on 09/12/1848, following the adoption of a federal constitution in the aftermath of a 27-day civil conflict known as the Sonderbundskrieg.^{199F}¹ At the formation of today's federal state in 1848, Switzerland reintroduced universal male suffrage. However, Jews did not have the same political rights as Christian citizens until 1866. Switzerland held federal elections from 10/01 to 10/27/1848. The Radical Left emerged as the dominant force, securing 79 out of 111 seats in the National Council.^{200F}² In 1874 a revision of the constitution introduced the people's right to referendums and in 1881 the right to petition for a referendum was introduced. During the First World War, Switzerland maintained its neutrality. In 1919 a proportional voting system was introduced, allowing for better representation of the working class within parliament.³ Foreign Minister Guiseppe Motta subsequently withdrew Switzerland from the League of Nations amidst pre-War tensions in 1938, to ensure Switzerland's complete neutrality once again. A mix of military deterrence, such as the National Redoubt, economic concessions and lucky circumstances led to Switzerland never being invaded by the Germans.⁴ Between 1946 and 1951, multiple cantons rejected women's suffrage, in 1951 the Bundesrat (Federal Council) declared it is "too early" for a plebiscite on women's voting rights. A plebiscite in 1957 made the civil defense service mandatory for all women, during this plebiscite 33 women of the town Unterbach in the canton of Valais cast their votes, which were later annulled. On 02/01/1959, the first people's vote on national women's suffrage failed decisively. Based on our observations, competitive multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The V-Dem's CEI already declares the absence of irregularities with cleanliness outcomes. Moreover, the elections were free and fair (V-Dem EF&FI). The LDI shows an ambiguous level. In addition, both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI already scored a full presence of political liberties. Based on Polity5's assessment, during this period, the executive was either equal to or subordinate to other institutions, demonstrating strong constraints on decision-making authority. For the relevant period, LIED identifies political liberties as present, and V-Dem's PCLI is also classified by us as indicating that political liberties are present. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. Given the severe defect that women had no right and their rights were restricted also in other ways Switzerland is a borderline case between an electoral democracy and an electoral hybrid regime in this period.

02/07/1971 End Electoral Oligarchy (Patriarchal)/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date women's suffrage was introduced at a national level in federal elections after a nationwide (male) referendum in 1971, but the referendum did not give women the right to vote at the local Cantonal level and still allowed women to be barred from the ability to vote on the basis of their gender. All, save one, of the cantons independently voted to grant women the right to vote at different times during the second half of the 20th century. Before the referendum in 1971, women gained the right to vote for local cantonal elections in Vaud, & Neuchâtel in 1959; Genève in 1960; Basel-Stadt in 1966; Basel-Land in 1968; Ticino in 1969; and Valais, Luzern, & Zürich in 1970. The same year as the referendum in 1971: Aargau, Fribourg, Schaffhausen, Zug, Glarus,

Solothurn, Bern, & Thurgau extended the right to vote in local elections.^{201F⁵} St. Gallen, Uri, Schwyz, Graubünden, Nidwalden, & Obwalden soon followed in 1972, with Appenzell Ausserrhoden allowing women to vote in local cantonal elections in 1989. Those of canton Appenzell Innerrhoden had to wait until 1990 and a ruling of the Federal Court that forced the canton to grant women the right to vote.^{202F⁶} Switzerland federal government is led by a Federal Council which is traditionally comprised of representatives from the major parties that head different ministries. The federal council acts as the government but is usually not subject to much change over the years. This is due to the so called 'Zauberformel' which is an unwritten rule that decides who makes up the federal council. It was agreed upon by the major parties in 1959.^{203F⁷} According to this rule today, the three largest parties nominate two councilors each with the fourth strongest party nominating one. The result is that, as power is always shared, there are seldom changes of power. This form of government is described as consensus democracy.^{204F⁸} Parties, who represent substantial parts of the electorate but do not manage to be amongst the four strongest parties, are principally excluded from power.^{205F⁹} In the 2023 election, the four strongest parties were the right-wing SVP, the centre-left SP, the centrist Centre and the liberal FDP. The FDP nominated one councilor, the other parties two councilors each. The left-wing Greens, who managed to secure about ten percent of the popular vote, do not nominate any councilor.^{206F¹⁰} Proponents of this system point to it being conducive to internal peace and cooperation, which is necessary for a state as diverse as Switzerland.^{207F¹¹} It is, however, to be asked, if this system allows for the transfer of power necessary to reflect changing wishes of the electorate. As it makes de facto, no difference, if a party is strongest or third strongest, no party can truly 'win' or 'lose' an election if it stays amongst the three strongest. Still, the necessary qualities of a democracy are fulfilled. Since 1971 there has been universal suffrage, elections and free and fair with no hurdles in place to block certain groups from participation in politics. Based on our observations, multiparty, executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. The elections were constantly competitive for the entire time (LIED). After 1971 Swiss elections continued to have a high level of cleanliness according to V-Dem's CEI. Moreover, since the transition to a democracy the election conditions have been constantly free and fair (V-Dem EF&FI). According to FH, for the assessed regime period, the country is categorized as free with a score between 2 and 4, which corresponds to our interpretation of free. Additionally, LIED and V-Dem's PCLI maintain their scores concerning political liberties. These rights are protected by constitutional law. The bicameral legislative branch (National Assembly) is divided into the National Council, representing the public and the Council of States, which represents the cantons. The Supreme Court judges act independently and are elected by the National Assembly.^{208F¹²} As per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the relevant period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive.

Liberal Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Altman 2008, Linder 2009)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Switzerland_as_a_federal_state

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1848_Swiss_federal_election

³ https://www.bk.admin.ch/dam/bk/de/dokumente/komm-ue/Buku2009/der_bund_kurz_erklaert2009.pdf.download.pdf/der_bund_kurz_erklaert2009.pdf

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Switzerland_during_the_world_wars

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1971_Swiss_referendums

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage_in_Switzerland;

⁷ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/demokratie/die-zauberformel-der-schweizer-direkten-demokratie/48693224>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus_democracy

⁹ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/schweiz-bundesrat-regierung-zauberformel-1.6317687>

¹⁰ <https://wahlen.admin.ch/en/ch/>

¹¹ <https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/2021/09/mit-der-zauberformel-zur-konkordanz/>

¹² <https://www.britannica.com/place/Switzerland/Government-and-society>

References

- Altman, David (2008): Collegiate Executives and Direct Democracy in Switzerland and Uruguay: Similar Institutions, Opposite Political Goals, Distinct Results, in: *Swiss Political Science Review* 14, 483-520.
- Linder, Wolf (2009): Das politische System der Schweiz, in: Ismayr, Wolfgang (Hrsg.), *Die politischen Systeme Westeuropas*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 567-606.