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CHAPTER

41 Switzerland, *Quo Vadis?*: Current Challenges and Potential Solutions for Swiss Politics

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Abstract

This chapter looks at the five main political trends that have engulfed Swiss politics over the past few decades: alienation, centralization, digitalization, internationalization/Europeanization, and polarization. While they all reflect debates and developments found elsewhere, each poses a particular challenge for the consensual, direct-democratic, and profoundly federal Swiss political system. The first part of the chapter traces the nature and extent of each challenge and identifies the kind of problem it poses. Based on new and original expert survey data, the second part of the chapter then looks at possible solutions and reform options for the Swiss polity, its politics, and policy-making. We conclude by sketching two separate, yet inherently linked, paths that Switzerland may follow to accommodate these challenges: 1) changing the behaviour of political actors and 2) changing the institutional framework and the incentives it provides.

Keywords: [Alienation](#), [Centralization](#), [Digitalization](#), [Europeanization](#), [Internationalization](#), [Polarization](#), [Reform options](#), [Switzerland](#), [Challenges](#)

Subject: [Comparative Politics](#), [Regional Political Studies](#), [Politics](#)

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1 Introduction

Although Switzerland is often portrayed as a paradise of political stability, peaceful accommodation, and economic prosperity, many of the challenges currently confronting liberal democracies worldwide are no strangers in this land either. Some of these challenges come in the form of fierce debates over whether and how to act in certain policy areas. How can we solve the greatest problems of our time, such as climate change or economic crises, in a way that is broadly acceptable, given the consensual nature of Swiss politics and the significant obstacles to change that this entails (e.g. Vatter 2018; Freiburghaus and Vatter 2019; Linder and Mueller 2021)? Other challenges are more structural and institutional in essence, such as the increasing socio-economic heterogeneity between the country's twenty-six constituent units (cantons), all of which continue to enjoy perfectly equal rights and obligations under the country's symmetric federal architecture. A third type of challenge relates to the political actors and processes that characterize Switzerland's semi-direct democracy. Notably, the polarization of political parties, (non-)participation in elections and referendums, and a glaring lack of transparency about campaign donations, as well as the influence of vested interests over policy-making, have given cause for concern in recent decades (see 'The Ideological Space in Swiss Politics: Voters, Parties, and Realignment', 'Parties and Party Systems in Switzerland', and 'Direct-Democratic Votes' in this volume).

p. 774 In this chapter, we focus on five developments that potentially call into question the very functioning of Swiss democracy, namely alienation, centralization, digitalization, internationalization/Europeanization, and polarization. These five were chosen because to a greater or lesser extent they have all affected liberal democracies worldwide. ↪ There is thus a broad and varied literature upon which to build. This is not to say that these challenges are the only ones causing problems, nor that they are necessarily always clearly separable from one another. Yet they undoubtedly figure among the most pressing concerns. Moreover, each also poses *particular* challenges for a Swiss political system built upon the premises of 'amicable agreement' (Steiner 1974), non-competition (Lijphart 1968), non-centralization, and neutrality.

The first part of this chapter thus spells out the precise nature and extent of each challenge in general and identifies the kind of problem it potentially poses for Switzerland in particular. The second part of the chapter then reflects on possible solutions and specific reform options. In doing so, we draw on an original online survey conducted among all of the roughly 450 members of the Swiss Political Science Association in January 2022 (see Neidhart 1975 for a similar approach). Our survey gauged their support for different kinds of solutions in the domains of *polity* and *politics*, while also including a short section on *policy* changes. Eighty-three political scientists eventually completed the online survey; they broadly reflect the Swiss political-science community in terms of gender, age, status, linguistic region, and sub-discipline. We will first discuss the five challenges in alphabetical order, before proceeding to the expert evaluation.

2 Challenges for Swiss politics

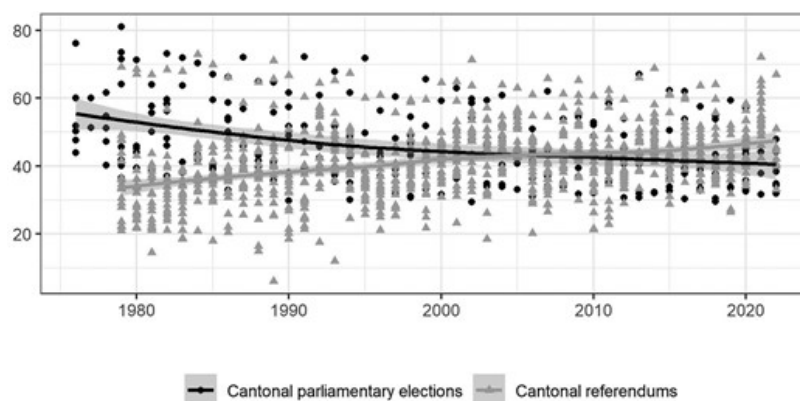
2.1 Alienation

Alienation encompasses a set of individual attitudes of estrangement from the political system. Typical manifestations of alienation include the progressive loss of political efficacy, a sense of political meaninglessness, discontentment, rejection, and/or voter apathy (Fatke and Freitag 2015). Seen from an international and comparative perspective, alienation is often said to constitute a key dimension in the crisis of representative democracy (e.g. Merkel 2014; Urbinati 2019). Some have gone so far as to state that voters do not actually want to be too heavily involved in decision-making (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Brennan 2016). While already problematic for ordinary representative democracies, widespread alienation could be devastating for a political system such as that of Switzerland, with its twenty-six cantons and over 2,000 municipalities, where both general elections and issue-specific referendums take place frequently at all three levels of government. What is more, it is not only necessary for voters to regularly vote in referendums and elect representatives, but given the prevalence of semi-professional structures, especially at the subnational level, many citizens must also be willing—and financially able—to assume a political mandate without adequate compensation (Freitag et al. 2019; Mueller 2015).

p. 775 At first sight, though, things do not seem to be as bad in Switzerland as elsewhere. Overall turnout in elections and referendums at the national level has remained stable and even increased a little since the 1990s (see ‘National Elections’ and ‘Direct-Democratic Votes’ in this volume). Switzerland also continues to dominate international rankings of trust in the federal government and satisfaction with national democracy (Bauer et al. 2019). Even many abstainers are satisfied enough with how things are currently going (Fatke and Freitag 2015).

Yet as regards both passive and active participation, voter apathy is felt particularly strongly at the subnational level. The inability to find enough candidates for local mandates is one of the main reasons for the stark increase in ‘voluntary’ municipal mergers across Switzerland (Steiner et al. 2021; FSO 2023; see ‘Swiss Municipalities’ in this volume). The cantons, too, while not lacking interested candidates, have seen participation in their parliamentary elections decline drastically over the past fifty years, from 55 per cent on average to just over 40 per cent (Figure 41.1).

Figure 41.1:



Turnout in cantonal parliamentary elections and referendums, 1976 and 1978—March 2022 (in per cent)

LOESS lines = annual average with 95 per cent confidence intervals. Each dot represents a cantonal parliamentary election or the annual mean for referendum participation in a canton. No data is available for elections in Appenzell Inner-Rhodes and Grisons and referendums in Appenzell Inner-Rhodes and Glarus, respectively.

Data source: Authors' graph with data from Vatter et al. (2020), BFS (2022), C2D (2022).

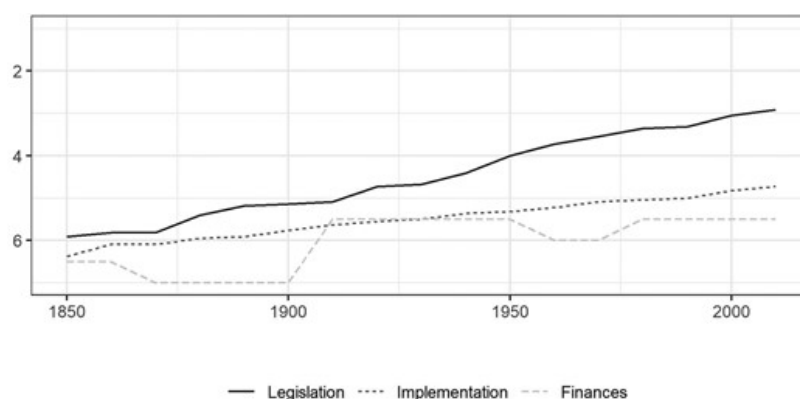
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Another indicator of growing alienation from representative democracy is the increase in non-traditional forms of participation, such as demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins—sometimes combined with, or boosted by, online activism. Two of the most noteworthy developments of the past decade are the Women’s Strikes and the gradual uptake of ‘Fridays for Future’ demonstrations. Both sets of social groups, i.e. women and the youth, have become increasingly vocal and organized in highlighting the insufficient attention paid to gender equality and climate change (see ‘Social Movements’ in this volume). Yet pressure from the street seems to be directed *at* representatives, not necessarily against them. The data presented in Figure 41.1 point in the same direction: in parallel to decreasing interest in cantonal elections, average participation in cantonal referendums increased from 35 per cent in the 1980s to almost 50 per cent by early 2022.

2.2 Centralization

Centralization describes the process through which legislative, administrative, and/or fiscal powers originally vested in the cantons are shifted upwards to the national level (Dardanelli and Mueller 2019). Since 1848, Switzerland has experienced centralization in all three dimensions captured by the ‘De/Centralisation project’ (Dardanelli et al. 2019), although this development has occurred to different degrees (Figure 41.2). This is good news for the cantons, as they remain important players on the level of both implementation and, especially, finances. All direct taxes, for instance, are collected by the cantons, of which they retain the lion’s share. However, this development is also bad news for the subnational level, as more and more obligations accrue at the federal level without the cantons having had an adequate say over the details, or even just the existence, of these rules. For although Swiss federalism has over time evolved from a dual-federalism model into a German-style administrative model, it lacks the corresponding archetype of regional shared rule, i.e. a *Bundesrat* where *Länder* executives are directly represented (Mueller and Fenna 2022).

Figure 41.2:



Development of (de-)centralization in Switzerland, 1850–2010

7 = total cantonal autonomy (de-/non-centralization); 1 = total federal power (centralization).

Data source: Authors’ graph with data from Dardanelli and Mueller (2019).

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More generally, there are two main problems with the ever-greater centralization of Swiss politics in the legislative sphere. The first relates to a possible disconnect between new or existing state-wide rules and their implementation on the ground. The lack of a regional voice or shared rule could translate into an unwillingness on the part of the cantons to adequately apply what the federal legislator—i.e. parliament and/or the people of the country as a whole (through popular votes)—has decided. Historically, this tension has always been there (see ‘The Implementation and Evaluation of Public Policies’ in this volume), but the greater the gap between legislative and administrative centralization, the greater the likelihood of such

incongruence. The 2004/2008 federal reform recognized this problem, but only partially remedied it through the disentanglement of federal and cantonal powers, on the one hand, and more flexible vertical cooperation mechanisms, on the other (e.g. Ladner 2018; Vatter 2018; Freiburghaus 2023). The fact that they are not directly represented at the federal level also provides cantonal governments with an easy scapegoat if things go awry.

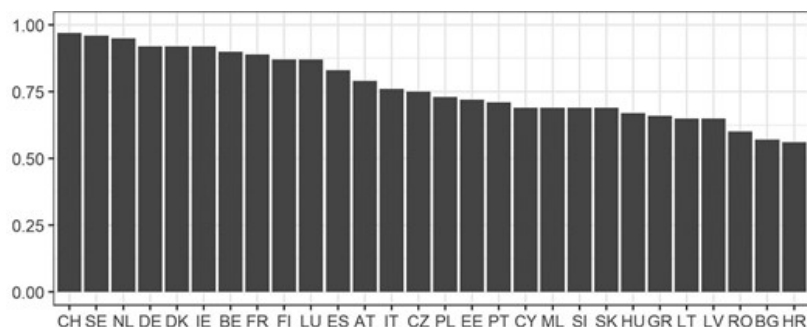
A second problem is a lack of transparency and the violation of the principle of fiscal equivalence, according to which decisions should be made by those who pay for and benefit from public service (Olson 1969). Dividing these overlapping circles potentially creates yet another set of issues, namely legislative encroachment by the federal government into regional domains—in the worst case without adequate compensation (e.g. Bednar 2009)—and greater inequality among the cantons when it comes to acting with their own resources and political will, even in formally federal domains. Moreover, top-down payments in the form of (unconditional) revenue sharing and cantonal discretion in implementation were often granted in exchange for legislative centralization. The cantons are thus often in charge of (implementing) federal policies, while at the same time not being in charge (in the sense of deciding).

2.3 Digitalization

In Switzerland, as elsewhere in the world, the impact of digital technologies on virtually every aspect of life has accelerated tremendously. For the Swiss economy, digitalization can be viewed as a ‘supply shock’ that affects everything from productivity to labour shares and profits. It also forces employees to transform themselves into a high-skilled digital workforce capable of managing ‘frontier technologies’ (e.g. artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, robotics). The Swiss people, in turn, hope that digitalization will expand opportunities and improve welfare. Ambitious e-government projects, in turn, should set ‘binding, nationally applicable regulations for the digital transformation’ (Digitale Verwaltung Schweiz 2023) to increase the efficiency and accountability of service delivery. According to the ‘UN Readiness for Frontier Technologies Index’ (UNCTAD 2021), Switzerland ranks second out of 158 countries—only the US is better prepared (Figure 4.1.3).

Although the ‘Industrial Revolution 4.0’ is transforming the social, economic, and political realms, we restrict the term ‘digitalization’ to the increasing use of information and communication technology, as well as of CivicTech, in governance processes (Gilardi 2022). Even on the level of political communication, political participation, and policy-making, the challenges are manifold and multifaceted. Due to its semi-professional politics, weak political parties, and ‘federalist’ fragmentation, Switzerland is, for instance, seen as ‘the least-likely critical case’ for the usage of Twitter for (online) political communication (Rauchfleisch and Metag 2016). And even if social media are adopted as a mobilization strategy ahead of direct-democratic votes and/or as a microblogging channel, sender and consumer profiles are heavily skewed by the ‘digital divide’.

Figure 41.3:



Readiness for 'Frontier Technologies' Index, 2021

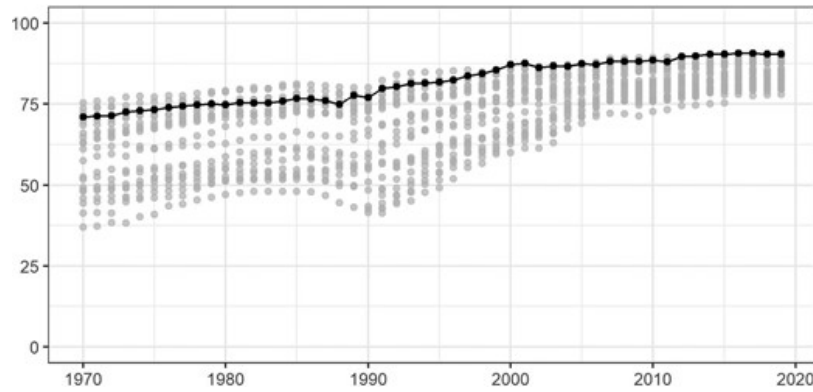
Data source: Authors' graph with data from UNCTAD (2021).

This divide also manifests itself in modes and practices of, as well as preferences for, political participation. Young people are particularly fond of voting-advice apps, e-collecting, 'hashtivism', and digital-democratic innovations, such as online participatory budgeting. (Cyber-)security issues, lack of transparency, and only partially fulfilled hopes for higher and more equal turnout in internet voting (e.g. Germann and Serdült 2017; Petitpas et al. 2021) pose another challenge for attempts to move beyond Switzerland's 'paper-and-pencil' democracy. There are also fears that through digitalization an already demanding political agenda—with popular votes and elections occurring regularly at all three levels of governance—will become even more burdensome. Finally, as regards policy-making, there is some evidence that social media undermines Swiss policymakers' capacity to craft compromises, as platform users can 'bypass' or even torpedo traditional gatekeepers, such as party elites and the mainstream media (Gilardi et al. 2021).

2.4 Internationalization and Europeanization

Switzerland's position in the world and the domestic consequences of its integration into global governance arrangements pose two separate, yet strongly interdependent challenges: internationalization refers to the increasing importance of global trade, international relations, treaties, and alliances for Swiss politics and policy-making (Sciarini et al. 2015), while Europeanization relates more specifically to the process through which the EU's legal, political, and economic dynamics are felt domestically (Sciarini et al. 2004, 353). ↵

Figure 41.4:



KOF Globalisation Index—Switzerland vs. EU-27, 1970–2021

Black line = Switzerland; dots = EU-27. The overall ‘KOF Globalisation Index’ combines *de facto* and *de jure* globalization. Overall indices for each of the eight aggregation levels (i.e. economic, trade, financial, social, interpersonal, informational, cultural, and political globalization) are calculated by averaging the respective *de facto* and *de jure* indices.

Data source: Authors’ calculations and figure based on KOF (2022).

Both trends are accentuated by Switzerland’s geographic location and social make-up: located in the heart of Western Europe, its population, like its different rivers, branches out and entertains dense relations with neighbouring countries—including important EU founding member states, such as Germany, France, and Italy, with which large swaths of the country share a language, culture, and functional spaces. Given its small size, Switzerland has always been particularly vulnerable in the global economy (Katzenstein 1985). Like other small states, it has strongly benefited from a rules-based international economic order. Aggressive expansion into international markets, with strong, sustained increases in exports and direct investments, have supported a process of intense globalization. According to the ‘KOF Globalisation Index’, since 1970 Switzerland has always ranked among the top-five most globalized countries. As of 2021, it is even the most globalized in the world (Figure 41.4).

Switzerland’s *political* integration into global governance frameworks has, by contrast, been much more reluctant (see ‘Switzerland’s Position in Europe and the World’ and ‘Switzerland and the European Union’ in this volume). When the UN was founded, the Swiss government ruled out membership, declaring the organization’s goals to be incompatible with neutrality. A first attempt failed in a referendum in 1987, resulting in Switzerland only joining in 2002. For the EU, too, Switzerland is a tricky customer. In 1992, Swiss voters rejected accession to the European Economic Area. Swiss–EU relations then developed by means of an ever-tightening web of more than fifteen sectoral or ‘bilateral’ agreements (Dardanelli and Mazzoleni 2021). Yet, European affairs have remained a highly controversial issue, with several episodes of domestic backlash. In 2021, the Swiss government even unilaterally broke off negotiations on a framework agreement with the EU. While Switzerland thus stays formally aloof from supranational organizations (or takes a long time to apply for membership), in the case of the EU it has reached a level of integration that can be characterized as ‘customised quasi-membership’ (Jenni 2014).

Both internationalization and Europeanization have spurred decisive changes in the logic of Swiss decision-making and power configurations. In ‘directly’ Europeanized or internationalized processes where there is a formal transmission mechanism specified by binding law, the centre of gravity has shifted away from the domestic level. The discretionary power of the Federal Council has been strongly enhanced at the expense of both parliament and interest groups. It is, after all, the government that negotiates treaties, drawing upon its (almost) exclusive powers in external affairs. Parliament, in turn, merely ‘rubber-stamps’ what the executive branch has agreed. Formal domestic consultation procedures also tend to be replaced by more informal and less inclusive mechanisms.

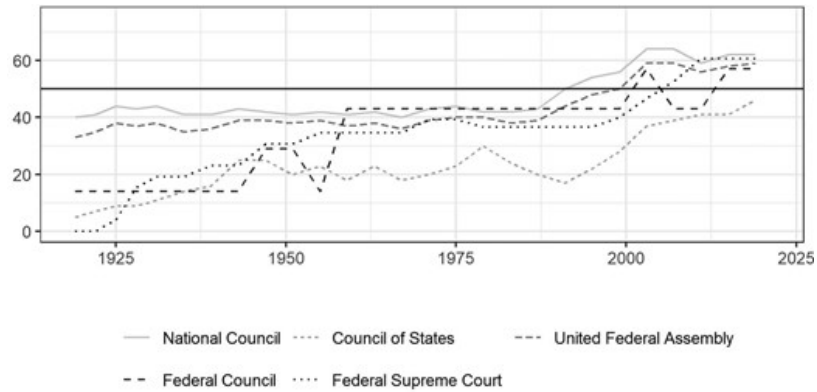
Such power shifts are visible in ‘indirectly’ Europeanized or internationalized areas, too. Even in the absence of formal treaties, Switzerland often unilaterally adopts rules set by global governance, a process known as ‘autonomous adaption’ (Sciarini et al. 2004; Jenni 2014). Both ‘directly’ and ‘indirectly’ Europeanized or internationalized decision-making processes have strongly contributed to the redefinition of the cleavage structure and to changes in electoral competition and the party system. On the one hand, Europeanization and internationalization foster a pragmatic ‘take-it-or-leave-it’ domestic consensus of pro-integration forces. On the other hand, they have opened political space for Eurosceptic, anti-globalist, and right-wing populists, as well as for radical-alternative left parties capitalizing on (and polarizing along) such issues. The rise of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), for instance, is intimately tied to the politicization of Swiss–EU relations (Kriesi 2007).

2.5 Polarization

Polarization comes in many different forms (e.g. Sartori 2005 [1976]; Dalton 2008). Its two most prominent manifestations are the increasing ideological distance between extreme positions and the disappearance of centrist voters and parties (e.g. Bochsler et al. 2015). A third, less often discussed manifestation of polarization is the increasing superposition of multiple issue dimensions on just one, typically the left–right, axis (Baldassari and Gelman 2008, 409). At the elite level, the Swiss party system has experienced all three types of polarization: the mainstream left has moved more and more to the left, and the mainstream right more and more to the right; centrist parties have been steadily losing ground since the late 1980s; and ever more issues—e.g. globalization, Europeanization, moral politics, gender equality, climate change, etc.—have been subsumed into the dominant left–right cleavage. Today, the tripolar Swiss party system, consisting of left, centre-right, and radical-right poles, resembles the political space found throughout Western European democracies (Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

To illustrate the disappearance of the centre, Figure 4.1.5 plots the combined seat share of pole parties across five federal institutions: the National Council (lower house), where since 1919 seats have been distributed proportionally to population; the Council of States (upper house), where each canton has two seats (with the exception of Obwalden, Nidwalden, Basel–Stadt, Basel–Landschaft, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, and Appenzell Innerrhoden, which each have one); the United Federal Assembly, i.e. the joint session of the two houses of parliament; the Federal Council, i.e. the Swiss government elected by this body; and the Federal Supreme Court. The 50 per cent threshold was surpassed in the National Council in 1991, in the joint session in 1999, and in the executive and judiciary in the early 2000s. Only the Council of States, elected mostly using majority/plurality rules, continues to have strong representation from centrist parties.

Figure 41.5:



Combined seat share of pole parties across key federal institutions, 1919–2021 (in per cent)

Pole parties on the left: the Social Democrats (SP), the radical and alternative left, and the Greens. On the right: the SVP (and its predecessors: the BGB and DP), small radical-right parties, and regionalist parties from Geneva (MCG) and Ticino (Lega). Shown are seat shares at the end of the election year (parliament) and at the beginning of the next calendar year (government).

Data source: Authors' calculations using data from FSO (2022).

This is not to say that the left and the right often agree on policy—on the contrary, according to Smartmonitor (2022), since 1996 alliances between the SP and the SVP have fluctuated between representing just 0.5 and 3 per cent of all closing votes every year in the National Council. In any case, the impact of the growing importance of actors at both ends of the left–right scale is probably more subtle: it forces the centrist parties (namely the Liberals and former Christian Democrats, whose party is now aptly called 'The Centre') to seek partners on either side of the hemicycle and often pulls them apart too. The share of parliamentary votes in which all four governing parties agree has correspondingly declined steadily over the past few decades. In parallel, there seems to be increasing discord not only within the two chambers but also between them: the number of conciliation committees, which are instituted if the two chambers of parliament continue to disagree after three readings on each side, has risen from a mere seven instances in the 1991–1995 legislature to more than twenty in every four-year period since 2007 (Freiburghaus 2018).

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Although polarization represents a general trend engulfing liberal democracies worldwide, it is particularly challenging for Switzerland, because the entire political system rests on finding compromise solutions. These are not only more difficult to arrive at in a polarized context, but also more easily defeated in the direct-democratic arena. The growth of both the left- and right-wing poles has enabled them to win more easily, both in debates and electorally. For instance, optional referendums, by means of which any group able to gather 50,000 signatures within 100 days of the publication of an act of parliament can force a popular vote, have been used with increasing frequency since the 1990s, rising from an average of just once a year to three times annually (Swissvotes 2022).¹ To these are added an average of six popular initiatives to change the federal constitution every year (ibid.). Here, party polarization intersects with direct democracy to create a unique vicious circle: as each side tries to lock in its (by nature quite radical) demands at the central level and/or uses the direct-democratic arena for mobilization and issue-ownership purposes, this leads to even more polarizing issues being added to the agenda on top of existing levels of polarization.

3 Potential solutions and reform options

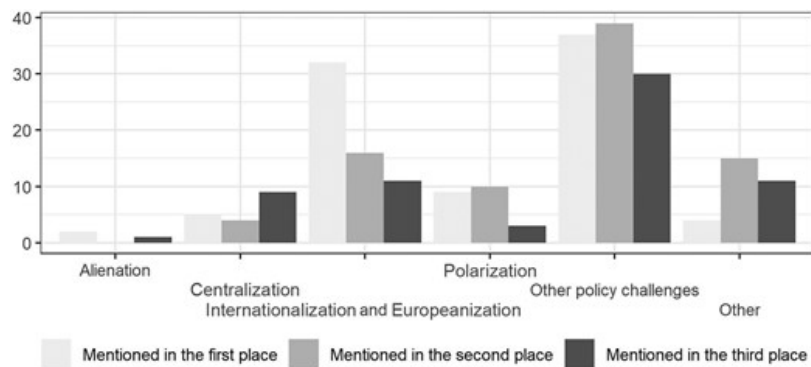
To what extent is there broader expert agreement that the five trends just identified do indeed constitute challenges? And what would potential solutions look like? We will now present the results of our survey of Swiss politics experts administered in January 2022.

3.1 What is the problem?

We asked for expert opinions on the most pressing challenges in two different ways. First, we posed a very open initial question: ‘Thinking about Swiss politics in very general terms, what are for you the most pressing current challenges? Name at least one and a maximum of three.’ We then grouped the replies into six categories, plus two residual ones (Figure 41.6). Europeanization and internationalization were mentioned the most often at all three levels of urgency, followed at a great distance by polarization and centralization. Among ‘other policy challenges’, climate change, environmental protection, and sustainable development together represented half of the issues mentioned as most urgent. 4

p. 783

Figure 41.6:

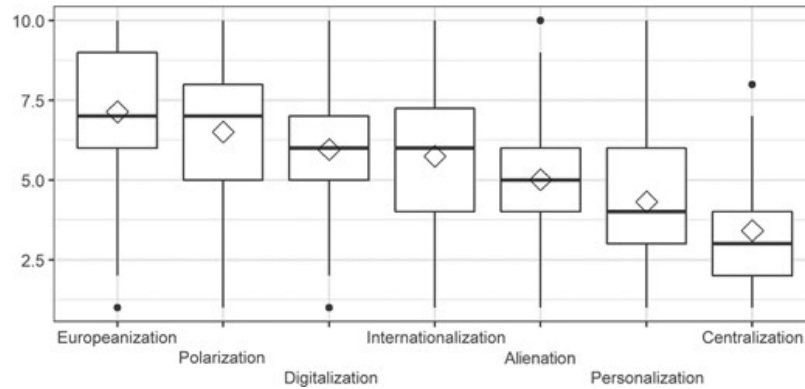


The most pressing challenges (for experts)

N = 244 challenges mentioned by experts. ‘Other policy challenges’ include policy fields other than ‘Europeanization and Internationalization’ and ‘digitalization’.

Data source: Authors’ data.

Figure 41.7:



Predefined challenges, as assessed by experts

Scale ranging from 1 = not at all challenging to 10 = the most challenging; horizontal line in the boxes = median; diamonds = mean values.

Data source: Authors' data.

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We then asked the experts to rank several predefined developments on a scale from 1 to 10, based on how challenging they thought they were for Swiss politics. To separate general globalization and internationalization issues from relations with the EU, we created two distinct scales. We also added personalization as a potentially distinct challenge. The results are shown in Figure 41.7, confirming the pattern just identified: Europeanization and polarization are seen as the most pressing challenges, while centralization and personalization are seen as the least pressing challenges. This aligns with the literature, where Switzerland's integration into global governance is prominently discussed. Geographical proximity and extremely close trade partnerships obviously make themselves felt: the EU 'is by far the most important market for the export-oriented Swiss industry' (FDFA 2022).

3.2 Reform options for the five challenges

What do experts think could be done to tackle these challenges? Beginning with Europeanization and internationalization, they point towards two levels of action. The first is mainly discursive: traditional discourse frameworks are still fairly prevalent that portray Switzerland as an 'exceptional country' whose economy is more prosperous and whose political system is more (direct-)democratic than those of most other states (Church 2016). Those in charge often invoke this 'Sonderfall rhetoric', just like citizens opposed to integration, to justify why the Swiss should pursue a 'third way'. Rather than simply following suit, Switzerland should preserve its alleged exceptionalism by negotiating close, but not too close, ties tailored to Swiss needs. According to the survey, some experts believe that political and/or economic leaders should bring an end to this 'Sonderfall rhetoric'. They should establish a new narrative that emphasizes the opportunities offered by deep(er) (political) integration into global governance over the risks.

The second remedy is situated at the policy level: most experts who mentioned *Europeanization and internationalization* suggest transforming Swiss-EU relations into a 'framework agreement' and/or concluding a modified, 'updated' version of such an agreement that would ensure the further development of the existing sectoral treaties. Some 20 per cent mention EU membership as a way forward, roughly equivalent to the share of the general public (gfs.bern 2021a). Hardly any expert advocates polity reforms that would return power to domestic actors. If they do so at all, their calls concern the further empowerment of the Federal Council in foreign affairs.

Turning to *polarization*, two radically different remedies are proposed: some experts advocate a narrow ‘pan-democratic alliance’ that excludes the SVP from government, a coalition type that amounts to a form of political rather than purely arithmetic consociationalism but still differs from a classic ‘government–opposition system’. The other remedy proposed is to broaden the government’s foundation through a ‘dialogue with all societal groups’, ‘political leadership [and] incentives for transparent and honest communication by political elites’. This would not only ‘uphold consociationalism’, but also force ‘parties and politicians to go for consensus [again]’. Both remedies have, in fact, been tried to some extent in the past: first, the SVP’s federal executive presence was doubled from one to two seats in 2003 to realign executive representation with popular preferences; second, the SVP departed more or less voluntarily from the government in 2008 (Church and Vatter 2009). Other proposals relate to more transparency and support for local media.

p. 785 *Digitalization* is something of the ‘odd man out’. When the experts were asked to rate it on a predefined scale, it was seen to be as pressing as internationalization and slightly less pressing than polarization (Figure 4.1.7). Yet when invited to brainstorm freely about current challenges, only a very small minority of the experts even mentioned digitalization and/or related aspects (Figure 4.1.6). Only one respondent identified digitalization as *the* most urgent issue, while three others placed it in the top two or three. Since evidence is still scarce (and often inconsistent), even experts may have struggled to grasp the meaning and scope of the challenges for Swiss politics evoked by the rise of digital technologies. Consequently, they also had a hard time coming up with remedies. ‘There is no easy solution’, as one respondent put it. Another respondent emphasized the need for a transformation of mindset (‘rethinking the world in “digital first”’) and was supported by a third respondent who stated that successful management of the ‘digital revolution’ necessitated, in the first instance, massive investment in (centralized) data-collecting, data-processing, and open, crowd-sourced, data-sharing infrastructure. Digitalization might thus be seen more as an administrative and technical problem than as a political challenge.

Alienation was mentioned even less often than digitalization in the open question: only two experts mentioned it in first place and nobody in second or third (Figure 4.1.6). Of these, only one offered a potential remedy in the form of a ‘neutral organization fighting fake news (and not only on traditional media channels) [and] deliberative mini-publics’.

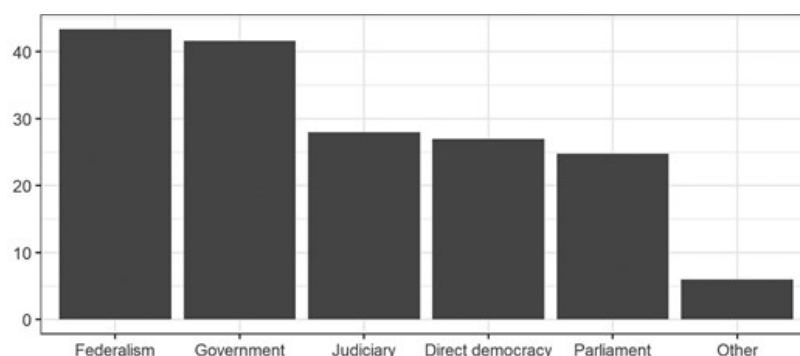
The fifth and final of the specific challenges we identified, *centralization*, was deemed the least urgent when specifically asked about (Figure 4.1.7). The only reason it was mentioned as often as polarization is that many experts in fact want to see *more* of it. The problems identified most often under this heading are simply ‘[the functioning of] federalism’ and the need for a reform of federalism: i.e. the over-representation of rural interests at the expense of urban ones and the ‘veto power of small cantons’; an inadequate vertical division of labour and ensuing coordination problems; and the problematic interplay between federal and (direct-)democratic structures. The solutions proposed are equally varied: five experts suggest institutional reforms involving the weakening of the Council of States and/or the abolition (or ‘rethinking’) of the double-majority requirement for constitutional change; four would give the central level more power; three demand a reform of the vertical allocation of powers—along with one who would like to see a proper steering committee composed of federal and cantonal representatives in times of crisis; and three others want the cities to have more institutionalized influence. None of the experts called for more decentralization or greater cantonal autonomy.

3.3 Reform options for the Swiss polity and Swiss politics

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We also investigated the need for and perceived urgency of reforming specific Swiss institutions (the polity) and decision-making processes (politics). In line with the previous section, Figure 41.8 illustrates that federalism and the federal government are the two political institutions experts regard as the most in need of some type of reform, followed by the federal judicial and legislative branches. Direct democracy is ranked fourth—nonetheless, roughly every fifth respondent thinks that something should be done to cure the ‘world champion of direct democracy’ (Altman 2011, 49).

Figure 41.8:



Swiss institutions that experts regard as most in need of reform (weighted)

Experts were asked to choose up to five institutions (plus a residual ‘other’ category) and rank them in order of their need for reform. Shown are the total scores arrived at by multiplying the number of times an institution was chosen by its priority (1st place = 1, 2nd place = 0.8, 3rd place = 0.6, 4th place = 0.4, and anything from 5th place onwards = 0.2).

Data source: Authors’ data.

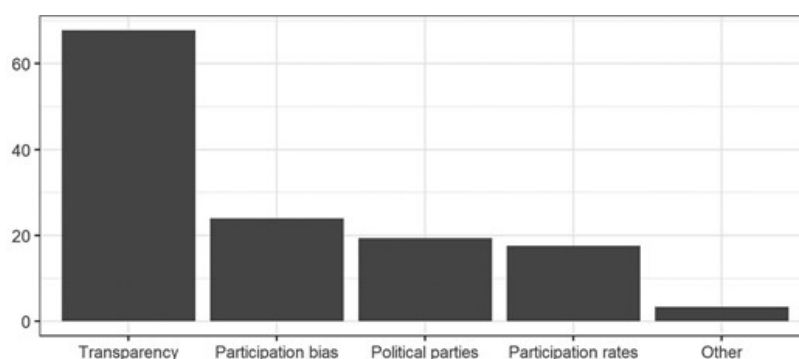
When it comes to Swiss federalism, the experts once again primarily call for a reduction of cantonal veto power in federal policy-making. Adjusting the two-seat guarantee in the Council of States (upper house) for small, rural cantons or changing (if not abolishing) the ‘double majority’ required to amend the federal constitution are cases in point. While the 2004/2008 landmark reform of the fiscal equalization scheme, along with the division of tasks, affected the *process* of Swiss federalism, the experts obviously believe that it is about time to tackle the so far largely untouched federal institutions. Finally, the experts are quite open to territorial reforms, whereas for the public, territorial integrity remains a ‘sacred cow’, with all previous attempts to reduce the number of cantons fiercely rejected (Ladner 2018; Vatter 2018).

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While the institutional architecture of the national government has remained essentially unchanged since 1848, the workload that the seven federal councillors must come to terms with has increased massively (Vatter 2020). What is more, tasks, duties, and government responsibilities are quite unevenly distributed across the seven federal ministries, which consist of between four and nine federal offices with the number of full-time equivalents ranging from roughly 2,200 to 12,200 (as of 2020; see ‘Federal Administration’ in this volume). In terms of possible solutions, the experts think that increasing the number of federal councillors from seven to nine (or even to eleven), in order to lessen the burden for individual ministers, is the most necessary reform proposal. In addition to increasing the size of the cabinet, extending the Swiss president’s term of office beyond its current one-year limit is another possible solution popular with experts that would require a constitutional amendment. Reshuffling policy tasks from one department to another would, for its part, be much easier to implement. Generally, the experts favour retaining the unique Swiss ‘assembly-independent regime’ (Shugart and Carey 1992). Pushing the Swiss governmental system closer to parliamentarism (e.g. by forcing federal councillors to sign a coalition agreement) or switching completely to this form of government are seen as neither urgent nor promising solutions.

Figure 41.9 provides a clear picture of the politics-related aspects that the experts think are the most in need of being reformed. Almost half of all respondents mention transparency of funding in campaigns. This is a finding worth emphasizing. For a long time, Switzerland was the only country in the Council of Europe without such regulations. However, in late 2021 (hence, before the expert survey was conducted), the federal parliament—under pressure from a popular initiative and confronted with political-transparency laws in several cantons—approved legislation obliging political parties to declare all donations above CHF 15,000 (\$16,700), and organizers of federal election or referendum campaigns to declare all expenses above CHF 50,000 (\$54,000). Experts believe that the idea of transparency should be even more strongly prioritized over donors' privacy. They are less afraid that donors would be more reluctant to open their purse strings if their involvement were to become public knowledge.

Figure 41.9:



Swiss actors and processes that experts regard as most in need of reform (weighted)

Experts were asked to choose up to four areas (plus a residual 'other' category) and rank them in order of their need for reform. Shown are the total scores arrived at by multiplying the number of times an actor or process was chosen by its priority (see Figure 41.8 for information on how the data were weighted).

Data source: Authors' data.

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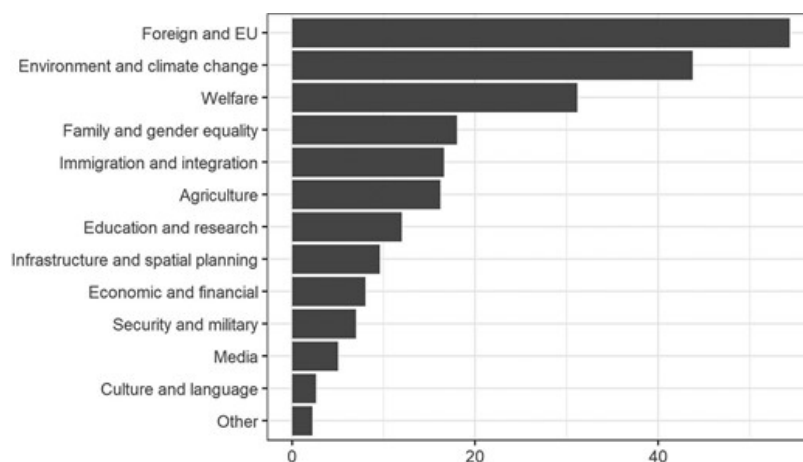
On average, fewer than half of all registered Swiss voters participate in federal elections and referendums (and even fewer than that in cantonal votes: Figure 41.1). This is significantly lower than global voter turnout, which oscillates around 66 per cent (Solijonov 2016, 23). While international observers often worry about low voter turnout in Switzerland, only every fifth expert regards abstentionism as the biggest 'political challenge'. Indeed, the share of permanent abstainers barely reaches 10 per cent (Sciarini et al. 2016). The same holds true for participation biases, such as the over-representation of the elderly. The experts thus seem convinced that the many opportunity structures that the Swiss political system offers to voters (namely parliamentary and, at the subnational level, also governmental elections, as well as popular votes at all three levels) evoke feelings of 'too much, too often', leading eligible voters to participate *selectively* (see 'Direct-Democratic Votes' in this volume).

When asked to rank potential reform options in terms of their necessity, the largest share of experts endorsed legislation that would force political parties to publish their budgets in full. Providing for state funding is fairly popular as well. Whereas some form of state funding is common in many, if not most, established democracies, as well as in many new democracies (van Biezen and Kopecký 2007), such a move would be revolutionary in Switzerland. Here, political parties are traditionally believed to belong to the private domain rather than the public one. Since they aggregate and articulate the preferences of individual citizens, they are correspondingly financed out of *their* pockets too.

Finally, Figure 41.10 plots which national policies our experts think would need to be reformed most urgently. In line with what has been said above regarding the five major challenges, foreign and EU policy

tops the list. Policies that address climate change and/or ensure environmental protection, as well as those that tackle demographic imbalances, i.e. health and welfare policy, come next. Culture and language, media, and security and military policy, as well as economic and financial policy, fall at the other end of the range.²

Figure 41.10:



Swiss policy areas that experts regard as most in need of reform (weighted)

Experts were asked to pick up to 12 policy areas (plus a residual ‘other’ category) and rank them in order of their need for reform. Shown are the total scores arrived at by multiplying the number of times a policy area was chosen by its priority (see Figure 41.8 for information on how data were weighted).

Data source: Authors’ data.

4 Conclusion

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The nature of Switzerland’s consensual, direct-democratic, and profoundly federalized political system makes it simultaneously more immune from and more vulnerable to contemporary challenges. It is more immune because the multiple levels of government and the various phases of decision-making act as safeguards against each other’s failure. For instance, the cantons can act autonomously if decision-making at the federal level is stalled, or the people can decide in a referendum whether a bill proposed by parliament is either too radical or too little, too late. But the system is also more vulnerable because this elaborate clockwork depends on each piece playing its part. If parties refuse to even entertain a compromise solution, if fewer and fewer citizens volunteer for office at the local level, or if digitalization overburdens an already loaded political agenda, the system reaches its limits in terms of both legitimacy and problem-solving capacity.

In this chapter, we have focused on five distinct challenges by drawing on the existing literature and comparative data, on the one hand, and a comprehensive expert survey of Swiss political scientists, on the other. This combination of ‘objective’ accounts with subjective assessments allows for a holistic perspective, i.e. one that is not limited to and/or biased by the excessively narrow boundaries of highly specialized subfields. Indeed, when assessing the five challenges through our experts’ answers, a nuanced picture emerges. Europeanization and polarization figure prominently in existing scholarly contributions *and* are widely agreed by experts to represent serious threats to Swiss politics. Digitalization, for its part, is often mentioned as one of the big ‘meta-challenges’—big but also vague, and still hardly researched. Hence even experts have a hard time grasping the scope and meaning of this challenge for Swiss politics.

Finally, centralization is an issue that worries scholars of federalism who fear federal dysfunctionality and instability, whereas other experts are more relaxed and even conceive of the empowerment of the federation

at the expense of the cantons as a solution rather than a problem, insofar as it helps to overcome policy gridlocks caused by the cantons' federal veto power (e.g. Mueller 2022). Accordingly, the possible solutions and reform options put forth in the expert survey vary widely, from mere discursive strategies (e.g. building new narratives) to redesigning core institutional features, such as the seven-member federal government (Federal Council) or the Senate-style second chamber (Council of States). A complete overhaul remains fairly unpopular among both the experts surveyed and the general public, which overwhelmingly takes pride in the existing Swiss political system. Even in late 2021, amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, 90 per cent reported being satisfied with how it works (gfs.bern 2021b, 34).

p. 790 Switzerland, *quo vadis?* In answering the pivotal question posed in this chapter's title, the preferred path forward is thus to *accommodate* the current challenges *within* the current system rather than setting up a new (or radically reformed) polity specifically designed to tackle them. There are basically two conceptually distinct yet inherently linked ways of doing so: changing political actors' behaviour or changing institutional ↪ frameworks and the incentives they produce. Consociationalism is dependent not only on power-sharing institutions but also on the political elites' willingness to engage in cooperative compromise — something that is nowadays severely undermined by high levels of conflict fuelled by one of the most polarized party systems in Europe (Bochsler et al. 2015; Freiburghaus and Vatter 2019; Vatter et al. 2020). Behavioural change would require that (party-)political elites once again abide by the values of non-competition and compromise, that the media report favourably on such a change, and that voters reward such newfound consensual strategies electorally and approve its results in popular votes.

While the structural challenges of being a 'small stat[e] in world markets' (Katzenstein 1985), as well as the rise of digital technology, would, of course, be far from being eradicated, reverting back to good, old Swiss-style 'amicable agreement' (Steiner 1974) would help enormously to address them via adequate policy responses. As long as there is no encompassing domestic consensus whatsoever (as is currently the case), Switzerland's bargaining position in relation to the EU and other external powers is seriously weakened. As the Swiss are currently most worried by the lack of ability of the political system to come up with solutions for the major problems of our times (gfs.bern 2021b, 50), breaking with party political wrangling and/or the vicious circle of polarization would certainly also help to strengthen citizens' identification with the representative side of democracy again — and hence lessen alienation.

The second option to accommodate the above mentioned challenges within the current system is to change institutional incentives through minor reform. Slightly reformed political institutions might incentivize actors to behave differently. If, for example, the Federal Council consisted of nine rather than seven members (or was elected by closed-list proportional representation rather than individually and sequentially under majoritarian rules), the breadth of popular political preferences could be accommodated even better. An even more ideologically diverse government could, in turn, better draft and defend broadly acceptable bills. The different groups and political parties would be encouraged to cooperatively feed their demands into the cabinet rather than resort to polarizing direct-democratic campaigns *ex ante* (through popular initiatives) or *ex post* (through optional referendums). Or if, to give another example, the number of signatures required to trigger a referendum was increased and e-collecting allowed, politically marginalized groups such as the youth might turn out more regularly, fostering long-term inclusion and political efficacy instead of abstention and (selective) alienation.

Whatever path is chosen, be it institutional reforms or modifying political behaviour (or both), one thing is clear: given the many veto players in Swiss politics, the challenges described here can be tackled only through a broad consensus. The key, as always, is to harness the multitude of political views and interests held and advocated by political parties, interest groups, social movements, and subnational governments. In this sense, it does not even matter *which* of the challenges is tackled first — be it centralization, through yet another federal reform, or Europeanization, through a new agreement with the EU — as long as it serves as an impetus to bring actors together again.

Notes

1. Relatively speaking, the share of acts of parliament challenged through that instrument has remained stable, but because the workload of parliament has grown, absolute numbers have too.
2. Note that the expert survey was fielded in January and February 2022, ahead of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

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