

# Federal Council (Switzerland)

## Federal Council

***Bundesrat*** (German)

***Conseil fédéral*** (French)

***Consiglio federale*** (Italian)

***Cussegl federal*** (Romansh)

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## Incumbent

(from left to right)

[Viktor Rossi](#) (**Federal Chancellor**)

[Élisabeth Baume-Schneider](#)

[Ignazio Cassis](#)

[Karin Keller-Sutter](#) (**Vice President**)

[Viola Amherd](#) (**President**)

[Guy Parmelin](#)

[Albert Rösti](#)

[Beat Jans](#)

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<b>Style</b>	<a href="#">His/Her Excellency</a>
<b>Status</b>	<a href="#">Head of state</a> <a href="#">Head of government</a>
<b>Appointer</b>	<a href="#">Federal Assembly</a>
<b>Term length</b>	Four years, no term limit <a href="#">Ulrich Ochsenbein</a> <a href="#">Jonas Furrer</a> <a href="#">Martin J. Munzinger</a>
<b>Inaugural holder</b>	<a href="#">Henri Druet</a> <a href="#">Friedrich Frey-Herosé</a> <a href="#">Wilhelm Matthias Naeff</a> <a href="#">Stefano Franscini</a>
<b>Formation</b>	1848; 176 years ago
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.admin.ch">www.admin.ch</a>

The **Swiss Federal Council** (**German**: *Schweizerischer Bundesrat*, **French**: *Conseil fédéral suisse*, **Italian**: *Consiglio federale svizzero*, **Romansh**: *Cussegl federal svizzer*) is the group of seven people who are the federal [government](#) of [Switzerland](#). As Switzerland does not have one person as "President", the Federal Council is also the [head of state](#).

## Members

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The whole council is responsible for leading the [federal administration of Switzerland](#), but each Councillor runs one of the seven federal ministries. As of 2023, the members of the Federal Council are, in order of seniority:

Member	Portrait	Joined	Party	Canton	Function
<a href="#">Alain Berset</a>		1 January 2012	<a href="#">Social Democratic Party</a>	<a href="#">Fribourg</a>	President for 2023 Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Home Affairs</a>
<a href="#">Guy Parmelin</a>		1 January 2016	<a href="#">Swiss People's Party</a>	<a href="#">Vaud</a>	Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research</a>
<a href="#">Ignazio Cassis</a>		1 November 2017	<a href="#">The Liberals</a>	<a href="#">Ticino</a>	Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Foreign Affairs</a>
<a href="#">Viola Amherd</a>		1 January 2019	<a href="#">The Centre</a>	<a href="#">Valais</a>	Vice President for 2023 Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport</a>
<a href="#">Karin Keller-Sutter</a>		1 January 2019	<a href="#">The Liberals</a>	<a href="#">St. Gallen</a>	Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Finance</a>
<a href="#">Albert Rösti</a>		1 January 2023	<a href="#">Swiss People's Party</a>	<a href="#">Bern</a>	Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications</a>
<a href="#">Élisabeth Baume-Schneider</a>		1 January 2023	<a href="#">Social Democratic Party</a>	<a href="#">Jura</a>	Head of the <a href="#">Federal Department of Justice and Police</a>

## Origins and history of the Federal Council

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### Origins of the institution

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The Federal Council was set up by the 1848 [Federal Constitution](#) as the "supreme executive and directorial authority of the Confederation".<sup>[1]</sup>

When the Constitution was written, [constitutional democracy](#) was still in its infancy, and the [founding fathers of Switzerland](#) had little in the way of examples. Switzerland has a long tradition of being governed by a council of

representatives instead of one powerful ruler, so while they drew heavily on the [U.S. Constitution](#) for the organisation of the federal state as a whole, they opted for the [council](#) rather than the [presidential](#) system for the executive branch of government.<sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup>

Today, only three other states, Andorra, [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), and [San Marino](#) have more than one person act as [head of state](#) at a time. The collegial system of government is often used for government. Many countries have a form of [cabinet](#) government with collective responsibility (that is, all ministers in the cabinet support the decision of the cabinet as a whole).

## Magic formula

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After the 1959 elections a *Zauberformel* or "magical formula" was invented. The formula works out how many members of the Federal Council each [political party](#) has, and showed that the Federal Council is always a voluntary [grand coalition](#).<sup>[4]</sup>

Based on their strengths in the Federal Assembly, the seats were distributed as follows:

- [Free Democratic Party](#) (FDP): 2 members,
- [Christian Democratic People's Party](#) (CVP): 2 members,
- [Social Democratic Party](#) (SPS): 2 members, and
- [Swiss People's Party](#) (SVP): 1 member.

The FDP and CVP have been getting less popular, and more people have supported the SVP and SPS. After the 2003 elections, the SVP asked for a CVP Council seat for their leader [Christoph Blocher](#) and threatened to otherwise leave the government. After the 2007 elections Blocher was replaced by another member of the CVP, so the strength of the parties is still:

- FDP : 2 members,
- CVP : 1 member,
- SPS : 2 members, and
- SVP : 2 member.

## Women on the council

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Women did not get the federal vote until 1971. The first woman to be an official candidate was [Lilian Uchtenhagen](#) in 1983.<sup>[4]</sup>

In total, only six out of 109 Councillors (or out of 27 Councillors elected since 1971) have been women:

- The first woman Councillor, [Elisabeth Kopp](#) (FDP/PRD), elected 1984, had to resign over a scandal in 1989.
- [Ruth Dreifuss](#) (SP/PS), served from 1993 to 2002, was the first woman to become [President of the Confederation](#) in 1999.
- [Ruth Metzler-Arnold](#) (CVP/PDC), served from 1999 to 2003, not re-elected to 2nd term (see above).
- [Micheline Calmy-Rey](#) (SP/PS), elected in 2003 and [Doris Leuthard](#) (CVP/PDC), elected in 2006, are in office as of 2007. They were both reelected in December 2007 for a four-year term.
- [Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf](#) was elected in December 2007. Along with [Calmy-Rey](#) and [Leuthard](#), the three now form the largest share of council seats occupied by women in the history of the seven-member council.

## Operation of the Federal Council

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### Presidency

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Each year, one of the seven Councillors is elected by the [Federal Assembly](#) as [President of the Confederation](#). The Federal Assembly also elects a Vice President. By convention, the positions of President and Vice President rotate annually, each Councillor thus becoming Vice President and then President every seven years while in office. The same person cannot be President two years in a row, or be elected Vice President in the years after he has been President.

According to the [Swiss order of precedence](#), the President of the Confederation is the highest-ranking Swiss official. He or she presides over Council meetings and carries out certain representative functions that, in other countries, are the business of the [Head of State](#). In urgent situations where a Council decision cannot be made in time, he or she is empowered to act on behalf of the whole Council. Apart from that, though, he or she is a [primus inter pares](#), having no power above and beyond the other six Councillors.

The President is not the Swiss [head of state](#) (this function is carried out by the Council acting together). However the President acts and is recognized as head of state while conducting official visits abroad, as the members of the Council never leave the country at the same time. More often, though, official visits abroad are carried out by the head of the [Federal Department of Foreign Affairs](#). Visiting heads of state are received by all the Federal Council together.

## Council meetings

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The Federal Council meets each Wednesday at the [Bundeshaus](#) in [Bern](#), the seat of the Swiss [federal government](#).

Apart from the seven Councillors, the following officials also attend the meetings:

- [Federal Chancellor Corina Casanova](#). As government chief of staff, she participates in the discussion but has no vote in the Council's decisions. Nonetheless, her influential position is often referred to as that of an "eighth Federal Councillor".
- the [Vice-Chancellor: Oswald Sigg](#). Sigg is the [spokesman](#) of the Federal Council and conducts the weekly press briefing after the meeting.

After the meetings, the Councillors always take lunch together. The Council also meets regularly in [conclave](#) to discuss important topics at length, and annually conducts what is colloquially referred to as its "school excursion", a day trip to some attractions in the President's home [canton](#). In that and other respects, the Council operates not unlike a [board of directors](#) of a major [corporation](#).

## Decisions and responsibilities

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Each Federal Councillor heads a government department, much like the [ministers](#) in the governments of other countries. Colloquially and by the press, they are often referred to as ministers. For example, the head of the [Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports](#) is often called the "minister of defence". However, as Council members, they are not only responsible for their own department, but also for the business of their colleagues' departments as well, and for the conduct of the government and the federal administration as a whole.

## Secrecy

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The meetings of the Federal Council and the result of the votes taken are not open to the public, and the records remain sealed for 50 years. This has lately been the subject of some criticism. In particular, the parties at the ends of the [political spectrum](#) argue that this secrecy is contrary to the principle of [transparency](#). However, the Council has always said that secrecy is necessary to reach consensus and to preserve the [collegiality](#) and political independence of the individual Councillors.

Despite the secrecy rule, details of the votes and the arguments in Council are sometimes [leaked](#) to the press, resulting in (generally fruitless) investigations and criminal prosecutions of the leaking staff member.

## Constitutional conventions

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Due to the Federal Council's unique nature as a voluntary [grand coalition](#) of political opponents, its operation is subject to numerous [constitutional conventions](#). Most notable is the principle of [collegiality](#); that is, the Councillors are supposed not to publicly criticise one another, even though they are often political opponents. In effect, they are expected to publicly support all decisions of the Council, even against their own personal opinion or that of their political party. In the eye of many observers, this convention has become rather strained after the 2003 elections (see below).

## Election and composition

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### Election mode

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The members of the Federal Council are elected for a term of four years by both chambers of the federal parliament sitting together as the [Federal Assembly](#). Each Councillor is elected individually by [secret ballot](#) by an [absolute majority](#) of votes. Every adult Swiss citizen is eligible, but in practice, only Members of Parliament or more rarely, members of Cantonal governments are nominated by the political parties and receive a substantial amount of votes. The voting is conducted in several rounds: in the first two rounds, anyone can enter their name; but in subsequent rounds, the person receiving the least votes is removed from the race until one candidate gains an absolute majority.

With Council seats allocated to parties by unwritten agreement (see above), Federal Council elections generally are unexciting, pleasant affairs. Usually, the party which has a seat to fill presents two candidates with mainstream viewpoints to the United Federal Assembly, which then chooses one. This was not so, however, during the 2003 election, which was the most controversial in recent memory (see also above).

Once elected, Councillors remain members of their political parties, but hold no leading office with them. In fact, they usually maintain a certain political distance from the party leadership, because under the rules of [collegiality](#), they will often have to publicly promote a Council decision which does not match the political conviction of their party (or of themselves).

### Resignation

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Once elected for a four-year-term, Federal Councillors can neither be voted out of office by a [motion of no confidence](#) nor can they be [impeached](#). Re-

election is possible for an indefinite number of terms, and it has historically been extremely rare for Parliament not to re-elect a sitting Councillor. This has only happened four times - to [Ulrich Ochsenbein](#) in 1854, to [Jean-Jacques Challet-Venel](#) in 1872, to [Ruth Metzler-Arnold](#) in 2003 and to [Christoph Blocher](#) in 2007. In practice, therefore, Councillors serve until they decide to resign and retire to private life, usually after three to five terms of office.

## Status of Federal Councillors

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### Councillors' lives

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The Swiss Federal Council, 2008. Official photograph

Unlike most senior members of government in other countries, the Federal Councillors are not entitled to an [official residence](#). Mostly, they have chosen to rent apartments or hotel suites in Bern (at their own expense); the only contemporary exception being [Moritz Leuenberger](#), who daily commutes by train from [Zürich](#) to Bern. However, they are entitled to use the Federal Council's country estate, [Lohn](#), for holidays; this estate is also used to host official guests of the Swiss Confederation.

Councillors can have an [Army](#) security detail if they need personal protection (in particular during official events). But often one can meet them without any escort at all in the streets, restaurants and [tramways](#) of Bern. Councillors are also entitled to a personal [bailiff](#) (*Weibel*) who accompanies them, in a colourful uniform, to official events. This tradition goes back through the republican governments of the ancient Swiss cantons, right back to the [lictors](#) of the ancient [Roman Republic](#).

The spouses of Councillors do not play an official part in the business of government, apart from accompanying the Councillors to official receptions.

### Councillors' salary

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Federal Councillors draw a yearly [remuneration](#) of about [CHF](#) 400,000 (circa [EUR](#) 256,000 / [USD](#) 404,000).<sup>[5]</sup> After completing a full term of office, they are entitled to a perennial yearly pension of half that amount after leaving office.

While Councillors are forbidden by law to hold any other post during their term of office, it is not unusual for them to accept lucrative business engagements after leaving office, e.g., on the board of directors of major Swiss corporations.



## Immunity

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Federal Councillors, like Members of Parliament, enjoy absolute [legal immunity](#) for all statements made in their official capacity.

For crimes not relating to their official capacity, they can be prosecuted only with the permission of the Federal Council as a whole while in office. The prosecutor can appeal a refusal to grant permission to the Federal Assembly. <sup>[6]</sup>

Prosecution for crimes and misdemeanors that do relate to the Councillors' official capacity requires the assent of the Federal Assembly. In such cases, Parliament can also suspend the Councillor in office (but not actually remove her or him). <sup>[7]</sup>

According to statements to the media by a Federal Chancellory official, <sup>[8]</sup> in none of the few cases of accusations against a Federal Councillor has the permission to prosecute ever been granted. Such cases usually involved statements considered offensive by members of the public. However, one unnamed Councillor involved in a traffic accident immediately prior to his date of resignation was reported to have voluntarily waived his immunity, and Councillor [Elisabeth Kopp](#) decided to resign upon facing an inquiry over allegations of secrecy violations.

## Assessment and calls for change

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Historically, the collegial government of Switzerland has been assessed both internationally and nationally as exceptionally competent and stable. The Federal Council as a whole (although not individual members) has consistently maintained public approval and confidence rates in excess of sixty percent, possibly also because under the Swiss system of [direct democracy](#), voters can vent their displeasure with government decisions when deciding individual issues at the ballot box.

However, lately there has been a growing contention that the Federal Council is often too slow to respond to the needs of the moment, too resistant to change and too weak to lead the powerful federal [bureaucracy](#). Various changes have been proposed to address these issues, including expanding the powers of the presidency, expanding the Federal Council itself or adding a second layer of ministers between the Council and the departments. None of these proposals has yet borne fruit, however.

## List of "firsts" in the Federal Council

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The first seven members, elected 1848

- 1848: The first seven members elected: [Ulrich Ochsenbein](#), [Jonas Furrer](#), [Martin J. Munzinger](#), [Henri Druet](#), [Friedrich Frey-Herosé](#), [Wilhelm Matthias Naeff](#) and [Stefano Franscini](#).
- 1854: First (of only four so far) sitting Federal Councillors not to be reelected, [Ulrich Ochsenbein](#).
- 1891: First Councillor of the [Christian Democratic People's Party of Switzerland](#), [Josef Zemp](#).
- 1893: First member whose father was a member of the Council: [Eugène Ruffy](#), son of [Victor Ruffy](#). In 2007, the 2nd is elected: [Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf](#), the daughter of [Leon Schlumpf](#).
- 1911: First (and only) octogenarian in office, [Adolf Deucher](#).
- 1913: First (and only) native [Romansh](#) speaker, [Felix Calonder](#).
- 1917: First (and only) Councillor of the [Liberal Party](#) elected, [Gustave Ador](#).
- 1930: First Councillor of the Party of Farmers, Traders and Independents (BGB/PAI; now the [Swiss People's Party](#)), [Rudolf Minger](#).
- 1943: First Councillor of the [Social Democratic Party](#), [Ernst Nobs](#).
- 1983: First female candidate for the Council from a government party, [Lilian Uchtenhagen](#) (SP)
- 1984: First woman Councillor, [Elisabeth Kopp](#) (FDP).
- 1993: First Councillor of [Jewish origin](#), [Ruth Dreifuss](#) (SP).
- 1995: First Councillor living in a [domestic partnership](#), [Moritz Leuenberger](#) (SP) (with architect [Gret Loewensberg](#), whom he later married).
- 1999: First woman [President of the Confederation](#), Ruth Dreifuss (SP).

## Related pages

[[change](#) | [change source](#)]

- [List of members of the Swiss Federal Council](#) (by date of election)
- [Composition of the Swiss Federal Council](#)
- [Category:Members of the Swiss Federal Council](#) (alphabetical list)
- [List of presidents of the Swiss Confederation](#)

## Notes

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1. [↑](#) "[Cst. art. 174](#)". Archived from [the original](#) on 2010-12-08. Retrieved 2008-03-18.
2. [↑](#) See: *Directorate* in [German](#), [French](#) and [Italian](#) in the online [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland](#).
3. [↑](#) *Collegial System* in [German](#), [French](#) and [Italian](#) in the online [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland](#).
4. [↑](#) [4.0](#) [4.1](#) *Zauberformel* in [German](#), [French](#) and [Italian](#) in the online [Historical Dictionary of Switzerland](#).
5. [↑](#) [Art. 1](#) of the Parliamentary Ordinance on the Salary and Pension of Magistrates

6. [↑](#) [Art. 61a](#) of the Government and Administration Organisation Law
7. [↑](#) [Art. 14](#) of the Federal Law on the Responsibility of the Confederation and its Members of Authorities and Functionaries
8. [↑](#) (in German) Jürg Sohm (May 30, 2006). ["Bisher stets immun: Wegen Albisgüetli-Rede steht die Immunität von Christoph Blocher erneut zur Debatte". \*Der Bund\*](#).

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## Other websites

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Wikimedia Commons has media related to [Swiss Federal Council](#).

- [Official Website Archived](#) 2011-11-06 at the [Wayback Machine](#)

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