



University of  
Zurich<sup>UZH</sup>

Institute of Law



Introduction to Swiss Law

# Constitutional Law

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22 September 2023



## Overview

- Short History
- The Swiss Constitution
- Federal Authorities
- Swiss Federalism
- Fundamental Rights
- Political Rights
- Judicial System
- Tension Direct Democracy – International Law



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- 1848 First real national Constitution: creation of modern Switzerland
- 1874 First total revision of the Constitution; introduction of the optional referendum for federal acts
- 1891 Introduction of the popular initiative
- 1918 Proportional election for the members of the National Council
- 1921 Introduction of the optional referendum for international treaties
- 1971 Women's right to vote
- 1978 Creation of the Canton of Jura
- 1999 Second total revision of the Constitution



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## Federal Assembly (Legislature; Art. 148-173 Cst.)

### National Council (Art. 149 Cst.)

- Represents the people
- 200 members
- Popular election for four years



### Council of States (Art. 150 Cst.)

- Represents the cantons
- 46 members (2 delegates per (full) canton)
- Cantonal election for four years







## Federal Council (Executive; Art. 174-187 Cst.)

- 7 members  
(+ 1 Federal Chancellor)
- Election by the Federal Assembly for four years
- All major political parties are represented
- President of the Federal Council is elected for one year only





## Current Composition of the Federal Council (2023)



**Ignazio Cassis**  
Federal Department  
of Foreign Affairs



**Viola Amherd**  
Federal Department of  
Defence, Civil Protection  
and Sport



**Alain Berset**  
**President 2023**  
Federal Department  
of Home Affairs



**Albert Rösti**  
Federal Department of  
Transport, Comm-  
unication and Energy



**Karin Keller-Sutter**  
Federal Department of  
Finance



**Elisabeth Baume-  
Schneider**  
Federal Department of  
Justice and Police



**Guy Parmelin**  
Federal Department of  
Economic Affairs,  
Education and Research



## Federal Supreme Court (Judiciary; Art. 188-191 Cst.)

- Highest judicial authority in Switzerland
- 40 full-time and 17 part-time judges
- Election by the Federal Assembly for six years; re-election possible (and the rule)
- Seat of the Court: Lausanne; two departments located in Lucerne





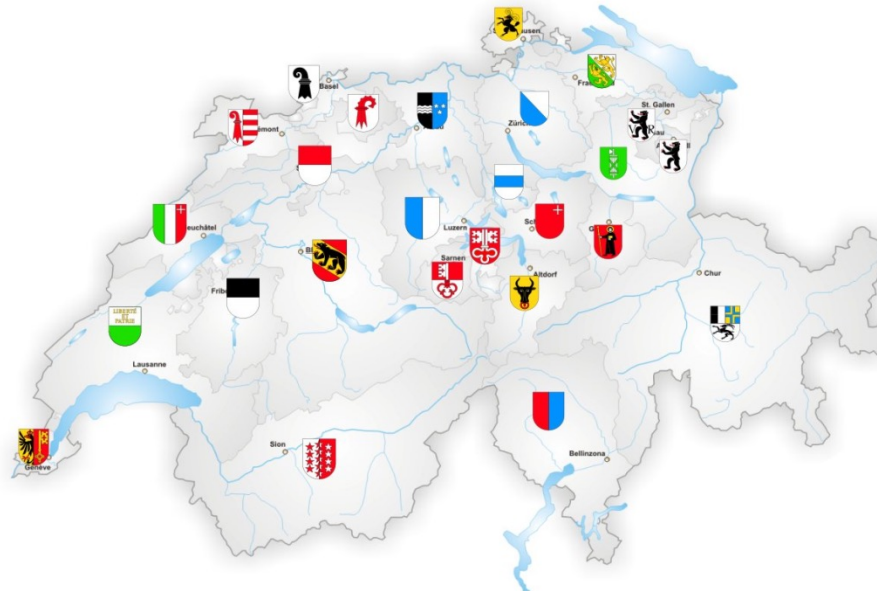
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## Art. 1 Cst. The Swiss Confederation

*The People and the Cantons of Zurich, Bern, Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden and Nidwalden, Glarus, Zug, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel Stadt and Basel Landschaft, Schaffhausen, Appenzell Ausserrhoden and Appenzell Innerrhoden, St. Gallen, Graubünden, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino, Vaud, Valais, Neuchâtel, Geneva, and Jura form the Swiss Confederation.*





# Competences

## Confederation

- All competences enumerated in the Constitution (Art. 42, 54-125 Cst.)



## Cantons

- All competences not conferred to the federation (Art. 3, 46 Cst.)
- Implementation of federal law (Art. 46 Cst.)



## Communes

- Competences are determined by cantonal law (Art. 50 Cst.)





## Principles

- Subsidiarity  
(Art. 43a Cst.)
- Cooperation  
(Art. 44 Cst.)
- Cantonal autonomy  
(Art. 47 Cst.)
- Precedence of federal law  
(Art. 49 Cst.)



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## Human dignity (Art. 7 Cst.)

### Equality and protection against arbitrariness

- Equality before the law (Art. 8(1) Cst.)
- Prohibition of discrimination (Art. 8(2) Cst.)
- Equality of men and women (Art. 8(3) Cst.)
- Protection against arbitrariness and principle of good faith (Art. 9 Cst.)

### Social rights

- Right to assistance when in need (Art. 12 Cst.)
- Right to basic education (Art. 19 Cst.)
- Right to free legal assistance (Art. 29(3) Cst.)

### Procedural guarantees

- General procedural guarantees (Art. 29 Cst.)
- Access to the courts (Art. 29a Cst.)
- Guarantees in judicial proceedings (Art. 30 Cst.)
- *Habeas corpus* (Art. 31 Cst.)
- Guarantees in criminal proceedings (Art. 32 Cst.)



## Civil liberties

- Right to life and personal freedom (Art. 10 Cst.)
- Right to privacy (Art. 13 Cst.)
- Right to marry and to have a family (Art. 14 Cst.)
- Freedom of religion and conscience (Art. 15 Cst.)
- Freedom of expression and information (Art. 16 Cst.)
- Freedom of the media (Art. 17 Cst.)
- Freedom to use any language (Art. 18 Cst.)
- Academic freedom (Art. 20 Cst.)
- Freedom of artistic expression (Art. 21 Cst.)
- Freedom of assembly (Art. 22 Cst.)
- Freedom of association (Art. 23 Cst.)
- Protection against expulsion, extradition and deportation (Art. 25 Cst.)
- Right to property (Art. 26 Cst.)
- Economic freedom (Art. 27 Cst.)



## Art. 36 Cst. Restrictions on fundamental rights

<sup>1</sup> Restrictions on fundamental rights must have a *legal basis*. Significant restrictions must have their basis in a federal act. The foregoing does not apply in cases of serious and immediate danger where no other course of action is possible.

<sup>2</sup> Restrictions on fundamental rights must be *justified* in the public interest or for the protection of the fundamental rights of others.

<sup>3</sup> Any restrictions on fundamental rights must be *proportionate*.

<sup>4</sup> The essence of fundamental rights is sacrosanct.”



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## Popular initiative (Art. 139 Cst.)

- Constitutional amendments
- 100'000 signatures within 18 months
- Formulated draft provisions or general proposal
- Double majority required: people and cantons

## Referendum

### Mandatory (Art. 140 Cst.)

- Constitutional amendments
- Double majority required

### Optional (Art. 141 Cst.)

- Federal acts and certain treaties
- 50'000 signatures within 100 days
- Simple majority of the people sufficient

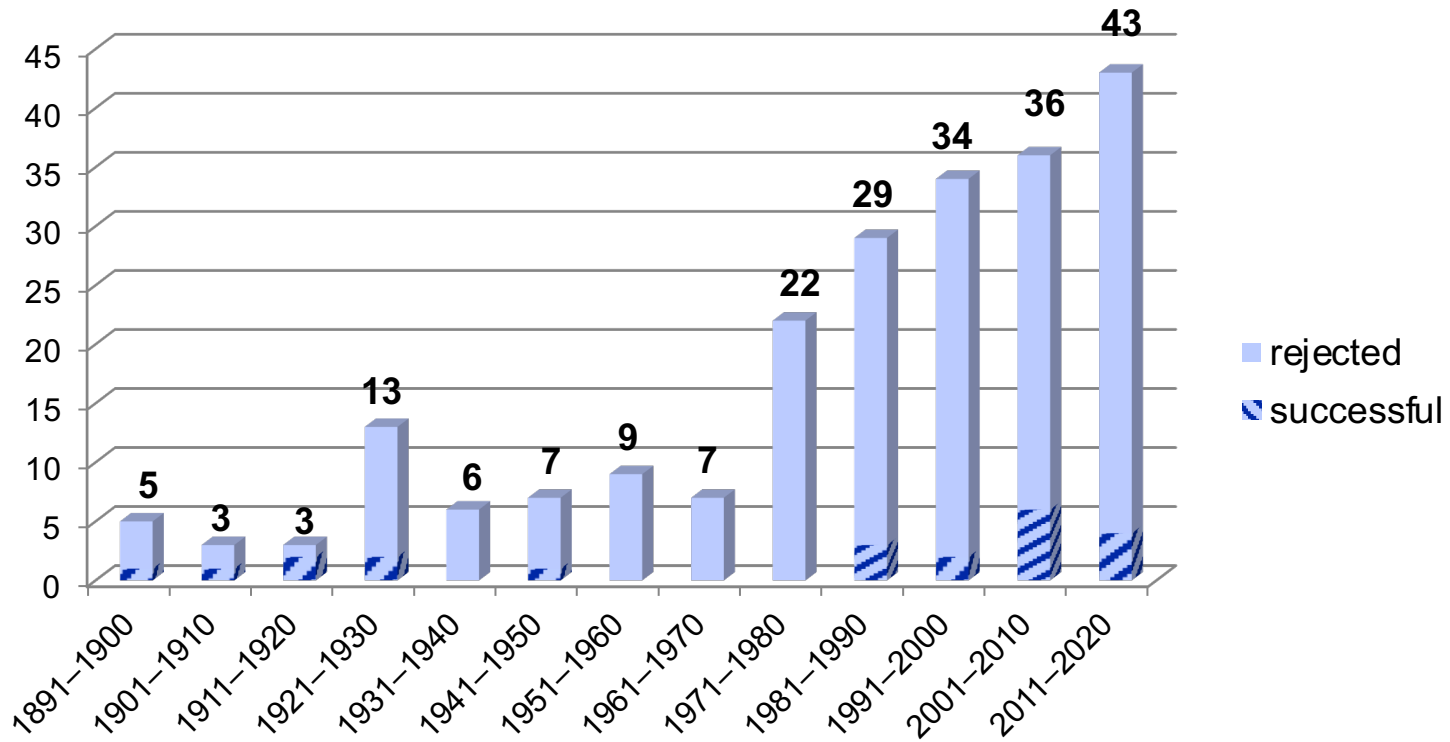
## Elections (Art. 149, 150 Cst.)

- Members of the National Council and of the Council of States





## Number of popular initiatives voted on





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Federal Supreme Court



Criminal Law Appeal

Public Law Appeal

Civil and Criminal Law Appeal

Subsidiary Constitutional Appeal

Public Law Appeal



Federal Criminal Court

Federal Administrative Court

Civil and Criminal Courts of the Cantons

Administrative Courts of the Cantons





## Limited Constitutional Review

### Art. 190 Cst. Applicable Law

“The Federal Supreme Court and the other judicial authorities apply the federal acts and international law.”

→ Federal acts must be applied by courts even if they are unconstitutional

Aspects that minimize the lack of a constitutional review of federal acts:

- The Federal Supreme Court interprets (also) federal acts in conformity with the Constitution
- It is not prevented from stating that a federal act is unconstitutional
- It can, and does, review federal acts for their conformity with the ECHR



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## Initiative for the expulsion of foreign criminals





- 28 November 2010: Popular initiative for the expulsion of foreign criminals approved by a majority of the people and the cantons
- Art. 121(3)-(6) added to the Constitution:

### **Art. 121(3) Cst.**

- <sup>3</sup> Irrespective of their status under the law on foreign nationals, foreign nationals shall lose their right of residence and all other legal rights to remain in Switzerland if they:
- a. are convicted with legal binding effect of an offence of intentional homicide, rape or any other serious sexual offence, any other violent offence such as robbery, the offences of trafficking in human beings or in drugs, or a burglary offence; or
  - b. have improperly claimed social insurance or social assistance benefits.



- 12 October 2012: The Supreme Court holds in BGE 139 I 16 that Art. 121(3)-(6) Cst.
  - are not directly applicable and therefore first need to be implemented by the legislator
  - do not take precedence over the principle of proportionality and the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution or the guarantees of the ECHR
- 20 March 2015: The Federal Assembly implements Art. 121(3)-(6) Cst. by amending the Criminal Code: Art. 66a(2): «The court may by way of exception refrain from ordering expulsion if it would cause serious personal hardship to the foreign national...»
- 28 February 2016: The people and the cantons reject the «popular initiative for the effective expulsion of foreign criminals»



## Mass immigration initiative





- 9 February 2014: Popular initiative “against mass immigration” approved by a majority of the people and the cantons
- Art. 121a added to the Constitution
- **Art. 121a Control of immigration**
  - <sup>1</sup> Switzerland shall control the immigration of foreign nationals autonomously.
  - <sup>2</sup> The number of residence permits for foreign nationals in Switzerland shall be restricted by annual quantitative limits and quotas. The quantitative limits apply to all permits issued under legislation on foreign nationals, including those related to asylum matters. The right to permanent residence, family reunification and social benefits may be restricted.



- 26 November 2015: The Federal Supreme Court holds in BGE 142 II 35 that the Agreement with the EU on the Free Movement of Persons takes precedence over any federal acts implementing Art. 121a Cst.
- December 2016: The Federal Assembly implements Art. 121a Cst. in a way that is compatible with the Free Movement Agreement (priority treatment for jobseekers who are registered with employment centres)
- 27 September 2020: The people and the cantons reject the popular initiative "for restrained immigration", which demanded the termination of the Free Movement Agreement





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**Thank you!**

