

How Swiss national and cantonal politics work

Switzerland has a **federal structure** with three different political levels: the Confederation, the cantons and the communes. The 26 cantons have their own constitutions and extensive areas of responsibility (including education, hospitals, infrastructure, culture and policing). They also levy a major share of direct taxation.

Voters have extensive rights of participation at each of these three levels. They are able to institute popular initiatives or referendums at federal, cantonal and communal level, and to vote in these (**direct democracy**).

In the canton of Basel-Stadt, the support of 3000 voters is required to bring a **popular initiative** to request an amendment to the constitution or to legislation. Popular initiatives and constitutional amendments must be submitted to a vote by the people (**mandatory referendum**).

In addition, if voters do not agree with a new law, a change in the law or a spending resolution passed by the Great Council, they have 42 days in which to gather 2000 signatures and thus force a referendum (**optional referendum**).

So the people have the final say. A number of referendums are held each year at national level and in the canton of Basel-Stadt. All Swiss citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote.

Come and see us

The parliament normally meets for two days a month in the Basel Rathaus.
Sessions are open to the public.

For guided tours contact *Basel Tourismus*.
www.basel.com

Plenary sessions are broadcast live on the internet at
www.grosserrat.bs.ch/de/service/web-tv.



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Great Council of the Canton of Basel-Stadt



The Great Council of the Canton of Basel-Stadt

The politics of Basel and Switzerland
– a brief guide

www.grosserrat.bs.ch

Did you know that the Great Council

is the parliament of the **canton** of Basel-Stadt and at the same time of the **city** of Basel?

is the parliament of the canton which has the smallest geographical area (**37 km²**), but which includes Switzerland's third-largest city in terms of population?

has **100 members**, contrasting with a government of seven members?

represents approx. **200'000 inhabitants**?

passes bills with **shifting majorities** because the nine parties cannot build a stable left or right of centre majority? The government, on the other hand, has a red-green majority.



Some politics

The politics of Switzerland and its cantons is characterised by a distinct system of checks and balances. Government, parliament, the courts, and of course the people share the power.

The Great Council enacts cantonal laws, supervises the government, administration and judiciary and decides on levels of taxation. Major expenditure by the government (from CHF 300,000) requires the approval of the parliament.

As in all parliaments in Switzerland, the members of the Great Council hold office on a part-time basis. Elections are held every four years. The presidency of the Great Council changes each year.

The Great Council is organised into 13 standing committees which advise on legislation, expenditure, etc. Both the committees and individual council members can also use a variety of parliamentary instruments which give them the right to ask the executive to act on a particular matter and, for example, to enact new law.

A little history

The history of the Great Council goes back to the 14th century, when most of its members were representatives of the guilds. The Great Council did not become a parliament in the modern sense, i.e. in a system based on the separation of powers, until 1875. Women have been allowed to sit in parliament only since 1966. (In 2017 women account for 32% of members.)

The Basel Rathaus (Town Hall) was built in the 16th century, after Basel became part of the Swiss Confederation (1501). The magnificent and historic council chamber in its present form dates from 1904.

