

## Swiss voters focused on migration ahead of polls

Ahead of Switzerland's general election on 18 October 2015, the European refugee crisis has reinvigorated the continuing debate in Switzerland on immigration and the future of the EU bilateral agreements. The 2014 referendum 'against mass immigration' is jeopardising the EU-Swiss Free Movement of Persons Agreement (FMFA), and immigration and EU relations will remain leitmotifs in the new term.

### Increasing focus on immigration issues amid refugee crisis

Ahead of the elections, discussion of the unfolding [refugee crisis](#) has underlined the Swiss dilemma, between controlling immigration and continuation of bilateral agreements with the EU, overshadowing even the repercussions of the [unpegged Swiss franc](#). The right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), which sparked the 2014 referendum 'against mass immigration', [launched](#) an initiative for a referendum against newly approved [revisions](#) to the asylum law in September 2015. The SVP claims that the changes (free access to lawyers for asylum-seekers and increased capacity to receive them), would turn Switzerland into a '[magnet](#)' for irregular immigrants. Switzerland, which joined the Schengen zone in 2005, expects some [30 000](#) asylum-seekers in 2015 and [similar](#) numbers in 2016. The SVP's popularity [rose](#) to 22.5% (up from 14.9% in the 1995 elections) following an anti-immigration push in 1999, when the country took in [46 000](#) asylum-seekers.

### Background: The Swiss bicameral legislature

The Parliament, the [Federal Assembly](#), is elected directly for a four-year term by 5.2 million Swiss voters. It consists of two chambers; a smaller chamber representing the 23 cantons (the Council of States) and a larger chamber representing the citizens (the National Council). Both Councils must approve decisions taken by the Federal Assembly. The Council of States consists of 46 members representing Switzerland's cantons. The National Council's 200 seats are allocated to the cantons according to their respective populations. Parliament elects the Federal Council (where seven seats are distributed according to political strength and linguistic representation), the Federal Chancellor and members of the federal courts. The Presidency is largely ceremonial – Parliament elects the President for one year as '[primus inter pares](#)'; first among equals.

### Popular initiatives — a key component of Swiss direct democracy

With several public votes a year on various issues, Switzerland holds the [world record](#) in public referenda. By collecting 100 000 signatures within 18 months, any Swiss citizen can launch a popular initiative to hold a referendum. Several [referenda](#) have been held on immigration-related issues recently. In 2009, a [majority](#) voted in favour of a national [ban on minarets](#). In 2010, an initiative on [expulsion of foreigners](#) convicted of a crime was [passed](#). In 2014, [50.3%](#) of voters passed an initiative '[against mass immigration](#)' to end the free movement of persons, which would, if implemented, breach the Agreement with the EU (see box).

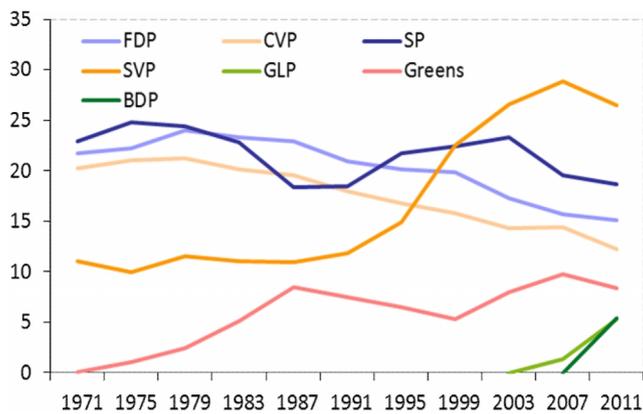
### Political parties between consensus and change

The Swiss consociational model is reflected in a stable political landscape. Four major parties have formed a grand coalition since 1959. However, new parties gained ground in the 2011 general elections.

*Swiss People's Party (SVP): The largest coalition partner with a strong anti-immigration and anti-EU stance*

The [SVP](#) was founded in 1971 when the Agrarian Party and the Democratic Party merged. SVP pursues national, conservative social and economic policies. Voter support for the party peaked in 2007 with 62 seats in the National Council, where it has remained the largest party despite losing eight seats in 2011. The SVP has been chaired by [Toni Brunner](#) since 2008, and has voiced its strong anti-immigration position in several popular initiatives. In September 2015, SVP politicians announced a new '[anti-burka](#)' initiative. Earlier, in March 2015, the party launched a '[self-determination](#)' initiative, demanding 'Swiss law instead of foreign judges' in order to avoid '[EU accession by stealth](#)'. The SVP has no European political party affiliation.

**Figure 1 – Main parties in the Swiss National Council**  
(percentage of votes 1971-2011)



Source: [Federal Statistical Office](#).

*Social-Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP): Divided on ties to the EU*

Founded in 1888, the [SP](#) is the most left-wing party represented in the Federal Council. With 18.7% of the votes in 2011 and 46 seats (three more than in 2007), the SP recovered its 2007 losses slightly and remains the second largest party in the National Council. The SP favours the '[rapid opening](#)' of EU accession negotiations. However, an internal split on EU ties gained visibility in the context of the Greek crisis, culminating when the Young Socialists demanded an invitation to European Parliament President, Martin Schulz, to a recent party conference be [withdrawn](#). The SP is chaired by [Christian Levrat](#), and is a [Party of European Socialists](#) affiliate.

*FDP – The Liberals: Aims to secure and 'further develop' Swiss-EU bilateral agreements*

[FDP – The Liberals](#) was formed in 2009 by the [merger](#) of the Radical Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. FDP garnered 15.1% of the votes in 2011, translated into 30 seats in the National Council, one seat fewer than in 2007, and is the third largest party in the National Council. As a liberal party, the FDP aims to protect civil liberties, individual responsibility and economic freedom. The FDP opposes EU membership, but supports the 'vital' bilateral ties to the EU and [calls](#) for the bilateral agreements to be secured and further developed. FDP is headed by [Philipp Müller](#) and is a member of the [Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party](#).

*Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP): Supports bilateral ties to the EU*

The [CVP](#) was founded in 1912 as the Swiss Conservative Party and took its current name in 1970. The party pursues centre-right, Christian democratic policies. CVP has continuously lost voters over past decades, especially [to the SVP](#), and is now the smallest coalition partner. It [supports](#) the continued bilateral path with the EU and endorses the idea of a safeguard clause that would let Berne [cap](#) immigration that goes beyond the EU average. Headed by [Christophe Darbellay](#), it is a member of the [European People's Party](#).

*Smaller parties on the Swiss political scene*

The centrist Conservative Democrat Party ([BDP](#)) was founded in 2008 as a splinter party of the SVP. It opposes EU membership, but [supports](#) maintaining the country's bilateral relations with the EU. It gained 5.4% of the votes and nine seats in the National Council in 2011. The Green Liberal Party of Switzerland ([GLP](#)) was founded in 2007. In the 2011 general elections, the party garnered 5.4% of the votes and 12 seats in the National Council. Its voters are mainly former voters of the left-wing, pro-European [Green Party](#), founded in 1971 and a member of the [European Green Party](#). The Green Party lost five seats in 2011, down to 15 seats.

## Outlook: Immigration and EU ties will remain leitmotifs in Berne

By launching several immigration- and EU-related popular initiatives with deadlines in 2016 and 2017, the SVP – the major coalition partner since 2003 – has set the tone for the next term. Strained EU ties and the repercussions of the refugee crisis illustrate that Switzerland remains closely connected to Europe, although the idea of EU accession (which some [86%](#) of Swiss voters oppose) remains off limits.

In February 2014, Switzerland – where almost [25%](#) of the population are foreigners – narrowly voted in favour of amending the constitution to **reintroduce quotas on foreign workers**, affecting all types of immigration. Implementation of the new provisions would violate the **Free Movement of Persons Agreement (FMPA)**, which is linked to six other agreements with the EU in the 1999 '[Bilaterals I](#)' package. The outcome of the referendum must be **implemented by February 2017**. The EU [rejected](#) Switzerland's request to renegotiate the FMPA. On 11 February 2015, Berne proposed a draft law, but said it would seek talks with the EU to avoid violating bilateral treaties. The European Parliament, in its 9 September 2015 [resolution](#) on EEA-Switzerland, noted that restrictions as required by the 2014 referendum risk 'undermining the benefits of the agreements for the EU Member States'. According to an April 2015 public opinion survey, some 60% of Swiss voters [prefer](#) to maintain bilateral agreements with the EU, despite the successful mass immigration referendum.