

How do you speak Swiss?

Consensus Democracy, Multilingualism and Political Participation

Executive summary

Aim and Research Question

Politics, law and language are closely linked in multilingual Switzerland. However, research on the role of language(s) in Swiss politics is scarce; legal perspectives are rarely integrated, and few studies look at cantonal councils or at the political participation of non(native) Swiss. The project “How do you speak Swiss?” aimed to address these research gaps by looking at the interplay between law, politics and multilingualism in Switzerland.

The overarching research question was: “How do legal frameworks and principles, political-institutional habits and structures and linguistic and multilingual practices and products interact?”. Or in short: “How do you speak Swiss?”

Methods and Approaches

To investigate links between legal, political and linguistic aspects, we conducted three case studies – each situated at the national, cantonal, and communal level, respectively. The case studies were based on an extensive literature review, taking into account publications from law, political science, (polito)linguistics and sociology. Theoretical and methodological approaches and methods from legal studies, sociology, ethnography, political science and (applied/polito/psycho/corpus) linguistics were combined to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data (e.g. surveys, text corpora, observations, interviews).

Main Outcomes and Implications

The main results and outcomes of the three case studies can be summarized as follows:

1. Legal conditions and frameworks, political structures and institutions and linguistic products and practices are indeed closely linked in Swiss politics. For instance:

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- Multilingualism and language diversity in politics mirror Swiss federalism: As regards the language(s) of debate, cantonal parliaments have different regulations (or even none). For example, Zurich only allows Standard German, while in Lucerne both Standard German and Swiss German can be used. This linguistic diversity can be interpreted in terms of the diversity-oriented federal fundamentals of Switzerland as laid down in the Constitution (Art. 2, 3 and 70 BV): One political system but different practices and norms.
 - Swiss politics depend on citizens' active participation and empowerment: To become a legitimate politician, new members of parliament need to learn and know what we termed 'Parliamentish', i.e. a specific institutional, political, social, linguistic code or 'foreign language' to be mastered. In German-speaking cantons, the acquisition may be facilitated by the option to use the more familiar language variety of Swiss German instead of Standard German (usually learned at school).
 - As in other contexts, informality is oil in the gearbox of Swiss politics: official, but casual gatherings such as coffee breaks, ski races or soccer tournaments, but also short unscripted moments of humor and emotions during parliamentary sessions allow Swiss politicians to meet and get to know each other on a personal level. This politically facilitates cooperation and the finding of compromises across party-lines and strengthens Switzerland's traditional consensus-democratic political system and culture.
2. From a legal-politological perspective, "Speaking Swiss" means to be part of an established political system and culture that values pluralism and liberalism, trusts in democratic institutions and authorities, believes in compromise and cooperation – rather than a majority dominating minorities –, and actively protects diversity and safeguards minority rights as constitutional obligations (cf. the Swiss Constitution), and values minority rights. For instance, in cantons such as Neuchâtel, residents without a Swiss passport are invited and eligible to actively participate in local politics, while in

the cantonal parliament of Schwyz, members of parliament without productive skills of the main language of debate (Swiss dialect) just use Standard German.

3. Language as power for Swiss values: Language can be (mis-)used to exacerbate polarization, but also to find compromises and consensus. Ideally, multilingualism may even foster a more standardized, more objective and less emotional speaking style in political debates as one of the case studies showed by means of analyzing TV debates. Institutional and individual multilingualism, language diversity and tolerance are key in guaranteeing the resilience of the Swiss political system and culture in times when established democratic principles around the world are at risk. An awareness of the power of language in maintaining, defending and strengthening the traditional and quite unique Swiss consensus democracy is crucial not only, but also for politicians.

Research Team

Institute of Federalism

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Prof. Dr. Raphael Berthele (Professor)

Dr. Naomi Shafer (Senior Researcher)

Impact and Outcomes

Scientific

- *Publications / working papers*

Berthele, Raphael (2025). Doing politics in the other language. Sentiment and subjectivity in Swiss political debates. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–18.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2025.2526705>.

Berthele, Raphael / Shafer, Naomi (2025). «Yes, I understood that in German: wishy-washy!» Political polarization and the foreign language effect. *International Journal of Bilingualism*. Online first:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069251398718>.

Richardier, Verena (under review). Faire de la politique sans être Suisse : trajectoires de légitimation d'élus locaux. Le cas de Neuchâtel. IFF Working Paper Online.

Richardier, Verena (under review). Voting but Not Standing: The Paradox of Foreign Political Rights in Neuchâtel and the Definition of 'The People' in Swiss Federalism. 50 Shades of Federalism.

Richardier, Verena / Shafer, Naomi (2026). Institutionalised Debates and Unscripted Instances in Cantonal Parliaments. IFF Working Paper Online No 55. <https://folia.unifr.ch/unifr/documents/335043>.

Shafer, Naomi (2025). Verhandlungssprache Schweizerdeutsch: Vom Gewohnheitsrecht in die Geschäftsordnung eines Deutschschweizer Kantonsparlaments. IFF Working Paper Online 47. <https://folia.unifr.ch/unifr/documents/331770>.

Shafer, Naomi / Berthele, Raphael (2025). «Verhandlungssprache ist Deutsch, in der Regel Schweizer Mundart»: Einblicke in das Debattieren auf Schweizerdeutsch im Kantonsrat Schwyz. Linguistik Online, 138(6), 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.13092/7mk7jv94>.

Shafer, Naomi / Hediger, Michael (2026). Wie spricht die Schweiz? Konsensdemokratie, Mehrsprachigkeit und politische Teilhabe. Literaturübersicht. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18668283>.

- *Seminars (in addition to internal seminars)*

Political Debates on the Foreign Language Effect. MA-Seminar at Fribourg University by Raphael Berthele (Spring Semester 2025)

Konsens und Kompromiss in der Schweiz. Linguistische Perspektiven. Workshop and Public Lecture by Prof. Dr. Juliane Schröter, University of Geneva, at Fribourg University (October 22, 2024)

Language, Culture and Conflict in Switzerland. Workshop and Public Lecture by Dr. Sean Müller, University of Lausanne, at Fribourg University of Fribourg/Freiburg (November 11, 2025)

- *Presentations / keynote speeches / webinars*

Talk by Verena Richardier in the MA-Seminar "Globalisations et Circulation" (Prof Dr. Antoine Kernén), University of Lausanne (February 28, 2025)

Mehrsprachigkeit und politische Debattenkultur. Public Lecture by Raphael Berthele. Schweizerischer Verein für die deutsche Sprache (SVDS), Zürich (May 3, 2025)

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Individual Multilingualism and reflective thinking. On the effect of the exolingual mode on political (and other) language uses. Keynote by Raphael Berthele. International Multilingual Conference: Developing Multilingualism and Fostering Reflective Skills, Intercultural and Transcultural Learning in Language Education. University of Innsbruck (February 26, 2026)

- *Invited lectures*

Plurilinguisme et politique : Sprachgebräuche in der Schweizer Politik. Lecture by Raphael Berthele and Naomi Shafer, Institute of Multilingualism at Fribourg University (October 16, 2025)

Investigating the Foreign Language Effect in Politics: Non-Dominant Language Use and Political De-Polarization. Guest lecture by Raphael Berthele. Waseda Institute of Language and Speech Science / ことばの科学研究所, GSICCS, Tokyo, Waseda University (April 24, 2026)

Non-Academic

- *Interviews*

Dialekt oder Hochdeutsch? Wie Sprache und Politik zusammenhängen. Blog der ch Stiftung für eidgenössische Zusammenarbeit (Juni 2025).

<https://chstiftung.ch/ch-blog/dialekt-oder-hochdeutsch-wie-sprache-und-politik-zusammenhaengen>

- *Media coverage*

Sprache, Macht, Staat. Sprachspiegel 4/2025. Vierteljahrsschrift. Hg. Schweizerischer Verein für die deutsche Sprache (SVDS). Darin:

- Konsensdemokratie, Mehrsprachigkeit und politische Debattenkultur (S. 2-7)
- «... denn Konsens fängt mit Sprache an.» -- Gespräch mit Naomi Shafer über Dialekt in der Politik (S. 8-31)

Blog-Beiträge «Blog vom Block»

- <https://blog-vom-bock.ch/2025/12/17/welche-sprache-spricht-das-parlament/> (17.12.25)
- <https://blog-vom-bock.ch/2026/04/19/kantonsrat-schwyz-nachhilfestunden-mit-witz-und-wirkung/> (19.04.26)

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- *Other*

Toons To Think:

This platform and app showcase digital comics known as webtoons. Funded by an Agora project, the initiative aims to disseminate research in a playful and interactive way. Webtoons related to the project are currently in preparation, and the app itself is under development, with a release scheduled for the end of June 2026 (Verena Richardier).

Additionally, the webtoon model was shared in a Junior Lab in partnership with the project “The Making of Solidarity: Social and digital networks in neighborhoods” (Verena Richardier).

<https://www.kantonsparlamente.ch/>

Development of an online platform designed to disseminate research findings and provide a structured overview of information and publicly accessible sources relating to Swiss cantonal parliaments (Michael Hediger).