

Switzerland

Ethnicity in Switzerland

Group selection

Although Switzerland is a multi-ethnic democracy par excellence, it is important to consider that ethnicity or language has so far not been subject to substantial political mobilization. Linder & Steffen (⁴³¹⁶, 10) note that: “[...] there has never been a political party that explicitly represented the linguistic groups, although this cleavage probably could have helped to win a not-so-negligible number of votes. But Swiss parties never tried to exploit the potential of this cleavage and therefore assisted in neutralizing ethno-linguistic tensions. This became possible because the parties were not considered as primarily linguistically-based, but more importantly as national parties.” This assertion reiterates Lijphart’s (⁴³¹⁷) earlier finding that religious cleavages explain Swiss individual electoral choices better than linguistic differences which he reports to account for merely 4.5 % of the variation.

⁴³¹⁶ [Linder Steffen, 2006]

⁴³¹⁷ [Lijphart, 1979]

However, there is no complete absence of regional parties that make claims on the national level. For example political parties like the Ligue vaudoise, the Mouvement Citoyens Genevois (since 2005; 1 seat in Parliament since 2011) or the Lega dei Ticinesi (since 1991, 2 seats in Parliament since 2011) have distinctly regional or even ethno-nationalist claims. Furthermore and more importantly, the Swiss consensus democracy and the respective influence regions and cantons have had in everyday politics and legislation of the past would make it rather far-fetched to treat ethnicity in Switzerland as being irrelevant. This can also be seen in the fact that a balanced representation of Swiss regions plays an important role when it comes to the assignment of offices.

We identify **Swiss Germans**, **Swiss French** and **Swiss Italians** as politically relevant ethnic groups. A fourth ethnic group is constituted by Romansh-speaking people, amounting to 35’095 inhabitants of Switzerland (first language; census 2000). However, no political party is primarily based on claims pertaining to this ethnic group; rather, their interests are incorporated into a variety of party programs. Therefore the Romansh people are coded as being politically irrelevant in all years from 1946 to 2017.

*Power relations**1946-2017*

Since 1999 Article 175 of the Swiss Constitution states that it must be ensured that the various geographical and language regions of the country are appropriately represented (⁴³¹⁸). The Swiss French have always been represented in the Swiss Bundesrat (the 7 people government). While this is not the case for the Swiss Italians (they have been represented by at least 5 members since 1945 (⁴³¹⁹)), one can argue with a view on the large variety of power-sharing and consensus-building mechanisms in Swiss politics that the few periods of non-representation of Swiss Italians do not amount to their political powerlessness. This judgment is backed by Linder & Steffen (⁴³²⁰, 22) who conclude that “the French- and Italian-speaking minorities hold a proportional share in political offices at all levels of the hierarchy”.

Hence, the Swiss Germans are coded as being a “senior partners” and the ‘Swiss French and Swiss Italians as being “junior partners” for all years between 1946 and 2017. Due to the extensive Swiss federalism, all ethnic groups are coded as having regional autonomy.

⁴³¹⁸ [Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation,

⁴³¹⁹ [Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2017]

⁴³²⁰ [Linder Steffen, 2006]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Switzerland

From 1946 until 2017

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Swiss Germans	0.63	SENIOR PARTNER
Swiss French	0.227	JUNIOR PARTNER
Swiss Italians	0.081	JUNIOR PARTNER



Figure 870: Political status of ethnic groups in Switzerland during 1946-2017.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Switzerland

From 1946 until 2017

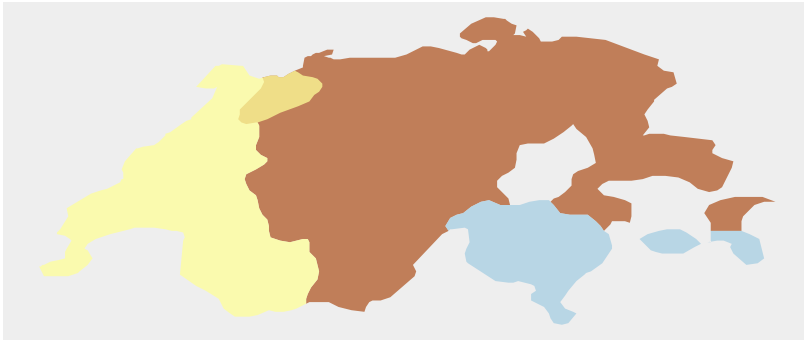


Figure 871: Map of ethnic groups in Switzerland during 1946-2017.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Swiss Germans	23 786	Regional & urban
Swiss French	9945	Regional & urban
Swiss Italians	4293	Regional & urban

Table 295: List of ethnic groups in Switzerland during 1946-2017.