

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 44 (2017)
Heft: 1

Artikel: A charismatic Swiss President
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906882>

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Download PDF: 28.04.2025

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A charismatic Swiss President

Doris Leuthard is the Swiss President for the second time in her term in office. She is seen as the epitome of a Swiss consensus-seeking politician and is also highly respected by her opponents.

MARKUS BROTSCHI

53-year-old Doris Leuthard is the second-youngest member of the seven-strong Federal Council, but at the same time the longest-serving. Media speculation suggests the CVP Federal Councillor could step down in the middle of the legislative period. Her departure by the end of the year is nevertheless not certain. She is showing few signs of being weary of office and still appears fully committed in her public appearances. She also still seems to have the desire to clearly explain infrastructure proposals to the Swiss people that can be very dull at times. In her department she has control over environmental, transport, energy and media policy.

Leuthard's political career is based on her instinct for political feasibility and majorities. When the former CVP President Philipp Stähelin stepped down at the end of 2003 after another election defeat for the Christian Democrats, the National Councillor was the firm favourite to succeed him. However, she only led the CVP for just over two years. After Joseph Deiss stepped down in 2006, she was his natural successor on the Federal Council and initially took over the Federal Department of Economic Affairs.

A godsend for the CVP

Leuthard was and remains a godsend for the CVP. The Federal Councillor enjoys great popularity which means she was predestined for the role of "first among equals". She is close to the people but refrains from chummy populism. It is not by chance that her High German is marked by a homely note of Swiss dialect. This means the qualified lawyer avoids coming across as aloof.

The native of Freiamt is the epitome of a Swiss consensus-seeking politician and the embodiment of the political centre as the CVP Federal Councillor. On the Federal Council, she and Didier Burkhalter have the task of securing a centre-left or centre-right majority. In light of the departure of Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf and the election of a second SVP Federal Councillor, Leuthard's role as a bridge builder has been further reinforced. For her department's infrastructure proposals worth billions, in particular, she has to tie up packages that take account of many interests in regional politics and business. That is politics based on consensus and compromise par excellence.

While Leuthard has also lost a number of referendum battles during her career, she has always taken defeat in her stride thus far. When delivering addresses and during debates she exudes tremendous composure rarely found in Swiss politicians. However, her aplomb sometimes takes on a condescending and admonishing tone. Members of Parliament and participants in debates who have provoked Leuthard's



Doris Leuthard always comes across as calm and composed when delivering addresses. While the CVP Federal Councillor has also lost referendum campaigns during her career, she has always taken them in her stride. Photo: Keystone

wrath or tested her patience with their remarks or questions will have experienced this. Whereas other Federal Council members maintain a dignified tone even after contemptuous votes, Leuthard makes opponents very aware when she thinks a contribution is not up to the mark.

Quick-witted in debate

Her quick wit during debates and her engaging manner protect Leuthard against personal attacks, such as those suffered by her fellow Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga at the hands of the SVP. Leuthard also goes down well with her political opponents. Even the CVP's election defeats have failed to tarnish her image. Admittedly, she has been fortunate on the Federal Council to have avoided contentious portfolios such as policy on asylum and foreign nationals.

Leuthard is rumoured to harbour ambitions of international office. She moves effortlessly on the international stage and regularly fosters relationships with foreign ministerial counterparts. Her good command of English and French help her in this respect. Even if her French betrays strong Aargau vowel sounds, she can easily hold her own in debates in French-speaking Switzerland. As Swiss President, she will probably not make as many trips abroad as her predecessor, Johann Schneider-Ammann. She will nevertheless undertake an impressive array of visits. However, there is no space in her diary for the SVP conference in Albisgütli where Christoph Blocher challenges the incumbent Swiss President to a battle of words. Leuthard's refusal does not come as a complete surprise. She previously turned down the SVP during her first year as President in 2010.

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