

# Government communication and systems of government in the swiss cantons

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## GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION AND SYSTEMS OF GOVERNMENT IN THE SWISS CANTONS \*\*\*

This article discusses the relationship between government communication and systems of government on the sub-national level within one country, Switzerland. It examines empirically the rules and the organisation that have been developed for the purpose of government communication within the individual cantons. The Swiss cantons can be defined as concordance and consensus democracies. The article poses the question of what this means for the particular form that government communication adopts in each canton. It is argued here that cantons with strong direct democratic elements present a more strongly developed organisation of government communication, make use of more resources and present a higher density of regulations than cantons with strong consensus government elements. The data show that this thesis finds partial validation.

*Keywords:* political communication, political system, Switzerland, cantons.

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## 1. Introduction

In every analysis of government communication, the political system in which the government operates constitutes the first explanatory variable. It is assumed that the form and extent of the communication of a government vary according to whether the system of government is presidential or parliamentary, to how strongly and independently the head of the government operates, to whether governments are composed of one political party or of party coalitions and to the strength of possible veto players (Lijphart 1992; Helms 2008; Pfetsch 2008). A second relevant explanatory variable is provided by the media system. It is supposed that the form and the extent of the communication of a government differ according to political parallelism, that is, the proximity of the media to the political parties and the extent of their orientation to the lines of political conflict of a society, to the general possibilities of influence that a government can exert over the media landscape, as well as to whether the political communication orients itself more strongly to the political logic or to the media logic (Pfetsch 2003; Hallin & Mancini 2004). Common to these analyses is that they focus on the national level, considering government and media systems in individual research studies or in comparative analyses on the cross-national level.

This paper takes another approach and discusses the question of the relationship between government communication and systems of government on the sub-national level within one country, Switzerland. With its 26 cantons and a population of 7.5 million, the Swiss Federal State presents a very high number of political units. Through its strong federalism, which leaves the cantons great freedom of action in important domains of politics, very heterogeneous political units have emerged with different political systems and socioeconomic structures (Vatter 2007: 148). The research question of the present article is whether and how these differences across cantonal systems of government affect the rules and the organisation of their government communication.

Our analysis focuses on the way government communication is organised and not on its extent or communicated contents. Rather, it examines empirically the rules and the organisation that have been developed for the purpose of government communication within the individual cantons. By

organisation we mean, on the one hand, the areas of competence of government communication and their hierarchical positioning in the canton and, on the other, the financial and human resources employed by the government for its communication. By rules of government communication we understand all dispositions that regulate the structural organisation on different legal levels and which legitimate the external communication. Such rules and organisation of government communication function as constraints on the action of individual members of the government as well as on its spokesmen (primarily Giddens 1984; McPhee & Canary 2008). In principle, organisations always exhibit – and governments are organisations – a hybrid being, as they are both actors as well as structures in which actors operate (Schimank 2001: 20).

Government communication is here understood as generic term for the manifold communication relations between the government and its members, on the one hand, and different environments such as the parliament, the general public, the media, public authorities and other national institutions, on the other. Within these communication relations the government can assume various roles. It can function as a creator, regulator, moderator, decision maker, participant in public debates etc. Pfetsch (1998) thus suggested that governing itself be understood as “a continuous and complex process of *interdependence management* between the political system and its social and media environment [...] which can be mastered only by the communicative competence of government actors” (Pfetsch 1998: 234, our italics and translation). According to this view, the government has thus the task of managing the interdependences among social sub-systems as well as among different social actors. Government communication is, in this respect, more than “political communication as a justification of decisions internally and externally,” but already includes the phase of the preparation of politics as well as the involvement of other participants in policy making (Gebauer 1998: 464, our translation).

The question of the interrelation between political systems in the Swiss cantons and government communication will be answered in three steps. Firstly, we will consider the distinctive features of the cantonal political systems through a comparison on the international and on the cantonal level. Secondly, we will investigate how these distinctive features affect government communication and attempt to define a working thesis.

Thirdly, in the final sections, we will present the data base and method used as well as the empirical results.

## 2. Cantons in Switzerland: Features and Typology

The 26 Swiss cantons are “political systems with strong elements of semi-direct democracy, in which the institutional relationship between government and parliament corresponds to that of presidential types of government and the conjunction of the principle of collegiality with consensus democracy acquires a particular relevance” (Vatter 2002: 45, our translation). The cantonal governments are elected in secret ballot directly by the people. The parliament cannot elect them, depose them from their office nor force them to resign. If we take Lijphart’s distinction between presidential and parliamentary types of government as a starting point, we see that cantonal governments conform to the presidential type with regard both to the institutional limitations of government and parliament and to the electoral procedure of the government. According to a third criterion that takes into account the degree of collegiality and co-determination, cantonal governments conform however to the parliamentary system. In all cantons the government is constituted of five to seven equal members and the concept of head of government does not exist. Decisions are made via majority rule and are subsequently represented externally by all members of the government (Lijphart 1992; Vatter 2002, 2007).

The practice of *consensus* on the cantonal level is strongly connected with the principle of collegiality, even though the former is not legally established (Vatter 2002: 44). One of the distinctive features of consensus is the broad participation of political minorities in the political process (Neidhart 1970; Lehmbruch 1967: 7; Lehmbruch 1993; Vatter 2002: 44). On the governmental level, this is reflected first of all in *government consensus*. Government consensus is indicative of the electoral strength of the parties represented in the government and, as a consequence, of the level of integration of relevant agencies in the cantons. On average, three to four political parties are represented in the cantonal governments. In 18 of the 26 cantons the share of electorate held by the parties represented in the government surpasses 80 per cent (Bochsler et al. 2004: 56; Germann 2002: 406). Secondly, consensus appears in *conflict settlement through*

*compromise* (Vatter 2002: 44). The aim of a decisional process is not that of asserting one's opinion, rather, that of finding a solution that takes into consideration all interests involved. Thirdly, *problem solving through cooperation* plays an important role for consensus. Through cooperation among all the actors a compromise is reached that benefits all parties concerned. This prevents that the few prevail at the expense of the many.

At a closer look at the government systems of the 26 Swiss cantons, it is possible to identify specific *differences among the cantons*. These differences pertain, in particular, to the formal and real weighting of the individual base institutions which leads to different mechanisms of conflict settlement and political confrontation in the cantons. On this basis, Vatter undertakes an initial classification of the cantons according to five types of cantonal democracy (figure 1).

The *direct democratic and centralised* type embraces only the two geographically small, but heavily populated urban cantons of Basle City and Geneva. They are highly centralised and have a low number of municipalities. Democracy in these two cantons is characterised by a high number of parties as well as by an intensive use of initiatives and referenda. The launching of initiatives and referenda is relatively easy. Although the share

Figure 1: The Five Types and the Two Main Basic Patterns of Cantonal Democracy

<i>Direct democratic centralised type</i>	<i>Direct democratic decentralised type</i>	<i>Formal participative type</i>	<i>Representative-democratic type</i>	<i>Executive power sharing type</i>
Basle City, Geneva	Zurich, Berne, Vaud, Fribourg	Aargau, Thurgau, Schaffhausen, Jura, Basle Country	Ticino, St. Gallen, Lucerne, Valais, Neuchâtel, Solothurn	Glarus, Uri, Schwyz, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Graubünden, Zug
<b>Direct democratic pattern</b>		<b>Mixed type</b>	<b>Consensus government pattern</b>	

Source: Vatter 2002; The two semi-cantons of Appenzell Innerrhoden and Appenzell Ausserrhoden could not be classified.



of the electorate held by government parties is low, there are many government mandates to be assigned. The *direct democratic and decentralised* type differs from the direct democratic and centralised type only in the fact that the cantons of this cluster are decentralised and have a high number of municipalities. They are four geographically large cantons with a dominant centre.

Distinctive of the *formal participative* type is the easy access to the institutions of direct democracy and the low electorate threshold for small parties. This easy access to democratic civil liberties, however, is not reflected in the effective use of these popular rights: initiatives and referenda are only rarely submitted. This type presents, moreover, a large number of parties, low government consensus and few government mandates.

The six cantons of the *representative democratic* type are characterised by low party fragmentation and a below-average use of popular rights. The access to the institutions of direct democracy is difficult, but the entry threshold for small parties is relatively low. These cantons stand out for the integration of political minorities in the government (high government consensus).

High government consensus is also a central feature of the *executive power sharing* type. This cluster, which consists mainly of small cantons structured around agriculture, stands out for the low number of parties, a high electoral threshold but, at the same time, a large number of government mandates. Initiatives and referenda are rarely made use of, although the access to the institutions of direct democracy is rather unproblematic.

In a second phase, Vatter condensates these five types in *two basic patterns of power sharing*. On the one hand, there is an emphasis of democracy, which is based on the direct access to the instruments of direct democracy and on their major practical relevance (direct democratic pattern: types 1 and 2, cf. figure 1). On the other hand, a basic pattern is found in which a broad integration of the political elite in the executive is strived for and in which the instruments of direct democracy are made use of less intensively (consensus government pattern: type 5 and partly type 4, cf. figure 1). Between these two basic patterns lies the formal participative type, which represents a mixture of both dimensions: here neither direct democracy nor government consensus plays a prominent role (Vatter 2002: 409; Vatter 2007: 161). In the two basic patterns of power sharing,

conflict resolution is achieved in different ways: “While in the consensus government prototype with a broad government coalition the informal search for a widely supported compromise within the political elite begins already at an early stage through dense interpersonal networking, in the case of the direct democratic prototype, the public articulation of the minorities’ interests, the prevention of decisions by majority rule and the pressure to enter negotiations [...] play an important role” (Vatter 2002: 413, our translation). The two basic patterns differ also with regard to the moment in time when negotiations and the conflict resolution take place. With the consensus government type, a compromise must be reached quite early within the elite, while with the direct democratic prototype this can happen also at the end of negotiations in the parliament via referendum (Vatter 2002: 413-54; Vatter 2007: 166). According to this logic, the behaviour of the political actors is rather competitive and mobilising at the base, while the coalitional prototype advocates rather consensual and integrative action (Vatter 2002: 454).

The consensus government type is present especially in small, lowly populated and traditionally agricultural cantons, where compromises are reached through an early and extensive integration of political actors in the government and their close interconnectedness (Vatter 2002: 459). The direct democratic type embraces mainly highly populated cantons with large urban centres and an advanced level of economic development. The presence of complex social problems and of organised interest groups outside the government makes it difficult to reach compromises at an early stage or to integrate all the interests involved in the decision-making process (Vatter 2002: 459). Initiatives and referenda represent here effective instruments to regulate conflicts.

### 3. Thesis on the Relationship between Government Communication and Government Systems

The cantons can be defined as concordance and consensus democracies. The question poses itself as to what this means for the particular form that government communication adopts. In principle we assume that the cantonal political systems favour definite organisations of government communication.



In pronounced concordance and consensus democracies, the negotiation of compromises and the involvement of all actors concerned is a central element of government communication. In concordance and consensus democracy, the government must communicate as a collective body, including all opinions, negotiating decisions, searching for compromises and mediating between positions. Normally, decisions are not communicated from top to bottom, but negotiated in a public discussion. Thus, Government communication in the Swiss cantons also encompasses the dimensions of the involvement of all actors, of cooperation and of compromise.

The act of negotiation and mediation of the government in the Swiss cantons can be understood, according to Pfetsch's definition (1998) as interdependence management. This understanding focuses on the government as organisation confronted with different demands on the part of the different subsystems to which it must respond. The notion of the government as a moderator that must mediate, negotiate and search for compromises, comes closest to the role that the government plays in concordance and consensus democracies.

As Vatter's typology (2002) of cantonal democracies shows, cantonal governments are exposed, moreover, to different institutional framework conditions within the cantons. Government communication can be here differentiated on the basis of Vatter's two basic patterns. In consensus government cantons, negotiations take place within the government and its closest circle – this is also confirmed by less recent findings by Geser (1981) concerning the administrations in small cantons. In contrast, in stronger direct democratic cantons, decisions are taken through public debates, initiatives and referenda and, if necessary, even against the position of the government. It seems likely that the position of the governments in consensus government cantons is less disputed than in direct democratic cantons. With regard to government communication, it can be said that governments in cantons of the direct democratic type must invest more in their external communication than governments in consensus government cantons. The *thesis* is here put forward that *cantons with strong direct democratic elements present a more strongly developed organisation of government communication, make use of more resources and present a higher density of regulations than cantons with strong consensus government elements.*

#### 4. Data Base and Method

Our data is based on a qualitative documentary analysis of all constitutions, laws, ordinances, and guidelines of the 26 cantons as well as on a questionnaire sent to all State chancellors and heads of communication. The cantonal State chancellors are normally chosen by the cantonal governments and manage the administration of the State Chancellery. They take part in the meetings of the cantonal governments. The documentary analysis served first of all to survey the rules of government communication. 320 documents were gathered and analysed in order to establish if and on which level (constitution, law, ordinance, guidelines) government communication is regulated in the cantons. Secondly, the documentary analysis allowed us to formulate possible categories for the answers in the questionnaire.

The questionnaire completes those dimensions of the documentary analysis which cannot be inferred from the documents. Two different questionnaires of ten pages each were created. The first questionnaire for State chancellors and heads of communication departments contained overall questions on the organisation, the resources and the coordination of government communication. The second questionnaire was addressed to media delegates and collaborators of communication departments and inquired about the practical realisation of communication work. The questionnaires were sent to all State chancellors and heads of communication of all 26 Swiss cantons in order to make a comprehensive survey (population: 104 persons). The filled out questionnaires were returned by 100 per cent of State chancellors, while 52 per cent of heads of communication took part in the survey.

From the collected data we individuated different typologies. The creation of a typology is useful to identify common characteristics (grouping of similar units of analysis under specific types) and allows for a systematic comparison between cases (contrasting of types) (Kluge 1999: 28). The precondition for adequately creating a type consists in a characterisation of the types on the basis of the same features. The features here used to build the typologies are: levels of regulations, competence, hierarchy, employment percentages and funds allocated to government communication.

## 5. Empirical Findings: Rules and Organisation of Government Communication

The communicational activities of the government, its functions and sphere of action as well as its organisation are regulated by various laws on various levels. In Switzerland it is possible to identify three legal levels: the level of the constitution, the level of laws and the level of the ordinances. The constitution and the laws have been negotiated in the parliament, that is, they have originated to a large extent outside the sphere of influence of the government. These two kinds of legal documents are binding to the highest degree. Ordinances, instead, present an in-between character: on the one hand, they implement what has been regulated in the constitution and in the laws, on the other, they are elaborated by the government, which leaves the latter a broad scope of action. The government is allowed the broadest scope of action especially in formulating guidelines. These are elaborated by the government itself without interference on the part of the parliament or of other actors, and for this reason they are binding to the lowest degree.

The question worth researching is whether and on which level the public communication of the government is regulated. The following typology illustrates the rules of government communication. It is important to point out that the classification of the cantons in types of legal regulations as well as the organisation of government communication does not say anything on the quantity nor on the quality of government communication. Conclusions are drawn only with regard to the rules and organisation that have been developed for government communication.

Figure 2 shows that the types of regulations of government communication empirically recognisable in the cantons are very heterogeneous. There is a larger group of cantons in which government communication is regulated on all four levels. There are then 13 cantons which present regulations for government communication at least on three levels. Only in five cantons are regulations present on two levels and only in the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden is government communication regulated just on the level of the constitution. Basically, it can be said that cantons do regulate their government communication. The levels on which regulations are expressed are, however, very heterogeneous and vary from canton to canton.

*Figure 2: Typology of Rules of Cantonal Government Communication*

<i>Number of level</i>	<i>Constitution</i>	<i>Law</i>	<i>Ordinance</i>	<i>Guidelines</i>	<i>Cantons</i>
4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Fribourg, Glarus, Neuchâtel, Uri, Vaud, Zurich
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Berne, Basle Country, Geneva, Jura, Lucerne
	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Aargau, Basle City, St. Gallen, Schaffhausen
	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Graubünden, Thurgau, Ticino
	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Solothurn
2	No	Yes	Yes	No	Nidwalden, Obwalden, Valais
	No	No	Yes	Yes	Zug, Schwyz
1	Yes	No	No	No	Appenzell Innerrhoden

Source: own data, N = 26

From an organisational point of view, the cantons have resorted to different ways to manage their government communication. The following analysis focuses on those organisational units to which the communication of the government is assigned on a cantonal level with a constitutional or legal mandate. Government communication is performed and coordinated to a large extent by State Chancelleries and communication departments.

Figure 3 shows that most cantons have created their own position for government communication, which entails one person (media delegate) or which is delegated to one department for communication. Half of the cantons have a communication department, eight cantons employ a media delegate and in five cantons it is the State chancellor who is responsible for government communication.

In a second phase, we looked at the subordination of this position, in other words at its location in the organisational chart of the canton. In 22 cantons the superior position is held by the State Chancellery, only in four cantons is the communication subordinated directly to the government – and here, for the most part, to the head of the government.

Figure 3: Typology of the Organisation of Government Communication

	<i>Type 1</i>	<i>Type 2</i>	<i>Type 3</i>
<i>Government communication competence</i>	State chancellor	Media delegate	Communication Department
<i>Hierarchical relation</i>	Chancellery	Chancellery/ Government in Solothurn and Zug	Chancellery/ Government in Basle City und Valais
<i>Human resources (employment percentage) for communication</i>	Under 100 per cent	100 per cent	Over 100 per cent (apart from Neuchâtel)
<i>Budget 2007 (in CHF)</i>	Under 500'000	Over 500'000	Over 500'000
<i>Cantons</i>	Appenzell Innerrhoden, Basle Country, Glarus, Schaffhausen, Ticino	Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Graubünden, Nidwalden, Obwalden, Solothurn, Schwyz, Uri, Zug	Aargau, Berne, Basle City, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Lucerne, Neuchâtel, St. Gallen, Thurgau, Vaud, Valais, Zurich

Source: own data, N = 26

The resources were then measured in the form of employment percentages in each canton. In the cantons in which the State chancellor is responsible for government communication, there is less than one full time position (under 100 per cent) for communication. Cantons that employ media delegates have one full time position (100 per cent) held by this media delegate. Finally, in cantons that dispose of a communication department, the employment percentages range between 170 and 590. The communication departments are often lead by an appointed manager employed up to 100 per cent, whose main function is to take care of government communication. Departments consist of two to seven employees, which make an average of 4.2 collaborators per cantonal department. The media delegates who are responsible for government communication are employed full time for the most part. They carry out their functions



in collaboration with the State chancellor(s) (the canton of Uri is, in this respect, an exception). The cantons in which the State chancellors are responsible exclusively for government communication have relatively fewer resources at their disposal. Typically the State chancellors absolve their function for government communication as an additional office and do not use more than a fifth of their work hours to this end.

The resources were measured also on the basis of the communication budget indicated for the year 2007. In principle, the budget for government communication ranges between 35'000 Swiss Francs in the canton of Zug and 2.2 million Swiss Francs in the canton of Berne. It is possible to identify a bipartition between cantons with a budget higher than a half million and cantons with a budget lower than a half million Swiss Francs. It is not surprising that cantons that have a communication department dispose of a higher budget than cantons in which the communication is carried out by the State chancellor or the media delegates.

## 6. Discussion of the Findings

The comparison between the types and basic patterns of cantonal democracies, on the one hand, and the regulations and organisation of government communication, on the other, does not reveal a clear picture. On the one hand, cantons with a high density of regulations are distributed relatively evenly over the types of cantonal democracies: three belong to the direct democratic and decentralised type (Zurich, Vaud and Fribourg), two to the executive power sharing type (Glarus, Uri) and one to the representative democratic type (Neuchâtel). A high density of regulations seems to find rather a parallel in the linguistic-regional level, since the French speaking cantons of Fribourg, Neuchâtel, Vaud, Geneva and Jura belong to the first two groups with a high density of regulations. On the other hand, an examination of the cantons that present few regulations for government communication reveals a connection, as they all belong to the consensus government pattern of cantonal democracies – four to the executive power sharing type (the cantons of Nidwalden, Obwalden, Zug and Schwyz) and one to the representative democratic type (the bilingual Valais).

The high density of regulations seems to confirm the tendency but does not forcefully entail a developed organisation of government communica-



tion. A combination of high density of regulations and highly developed organisation is found only in four cantons. These are the French speaking cantons of Fribourg, Neuchâtel and Vaud, as well as the most heavily populated canton of Switzerland, Zurich. Most of the remaining cantons that present an extensively organised level of communication belong to the average cluster with regard to their regulations. Only the canton of Valais presents a strongly developed level of organisation and, at the same time, a low density of regulations.

The relationship between type of government and organisation of government communication is quite unmistakable: all cantons fitting in the direct democratic pattern, be it centralised or decentralised, belong to the type with a developed organisation. This way, both the large decentralised cantons, such as Berne, Fribourg, Vaud and Zurich, as well as the small urban cantons of Geneva and Basle City present a highly structured level of organisation. In contrast, no apparent relationship can be established between consensus government types and their level of organisation, as these thirteen cantons are distributed over all three types of organisation.

This shows that a comparison between the cantonal government systems and the characteristics of their government communication can only partially explain the differences among the cantons. An obvious way to establish other reasons to account for the differentiation of government communication across the cantons would consist in making a comparison based on the number of inhabitants per canton, as population density varies considerably in Switzerland. It seems logical to suppose that lowly populated cantons dispose of fewer resources and need fewer rules than larger cantons. However, such a comparison also fails to yield univocal results: Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Glarus und Uri, some of the three most strongly regulated cantons, have a rather low population density (less than 60'000 inhabitants). Vice versa, two cantons with a lowly developed level of organisation, namely Basle Country and Ticino, have a very high number of inhabitants (over 200'000 inhabitants). It is certainly no coincidence, however, that the six most heavily populated cantons (Aargau, Berne, Geneva, St. Gallen, Vaud and Zurich) all belong to the developed type with a communication department.

## 7. Conclusion

The present article tries to answer the question of whether and how the differences in the government systems of the Swiss cantons are reflected in their regulations and organisation of government communication. To this end, we formulated the thesis that cantons with strong direct democratic elements present more strongly developed organisation of government communication and make use of more resources for communication than cantons with strong consensus government elements. This thesis finds partial validation. We found out that all the cantons with a low density of regulations (communication regulated on two levels) correspond to the basic pattern of consensus government cantons. Besides, the direct democratic cantons, in which the shaping of public opinion comes about through public discussion and the role of the government is relatively disputed, all have a communication department. Moreover, there is evidence that the size of the cantons and their geographical position (in particular in the case of the French speaking western regions and of central Switzerland) play an important role in the differentiation of government communication. It is, however, worthwhile to devote further, in-depth study to the differences and the interrelation between government systems, government communication and other possible determinant variables.

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