

What is federalism?

Federalism is a way of organising a State by sharing political power between the centre and the regions. A federal State is an alliance of several federated states. Switzerland is a federal State made up of 26 federated cantons.

How it functions

Switzerland is a federation whose citizens are subjected to two bodies of laws: **federal laws** and **cantonal laws**.

Every canton has **its own political institutions**: A parliament, a government and law courts. This proximity between political authorities and citizens is seen as an advantage.

Every canton can respond to its own particular needs. **Minorities** are in this way better **protected**.

The unity of the country is preserved, as all the cantons are subjected to the authority of the Federal Constitution.

The system is sometimes complex. It superimposes several levels of authority and laws that can slow down its functioning.



Several States have chosen the federal system: Switzerland, Germany, Austria, United States, Canada, Australia, Mexico, India, Pakistan and Malaysia just to mention a few. This list is above all made up of highly populated States or where the territory is vast, except for Switzerland and Austria. Federalism is the most effective system of running this type of State, often made up of numerous diverse minorities.



The role of the cantons

The Federal Constitution **divides tasks** between the Federal Government and the cantons (→ p. 48).

The cantons have their own Constitution and define their own laws.

At federal level, each canton has two seats at the **Council of States** (→ p. 56), the former half-cantons have one seat. Cantonal representatives share legislative power with the National Council that represents the people.

The cantons also give an opinion during the **consultation procedure** (→ p. 62).

The cantons have the **right to call a referendum**. If a minimum of 8 cantons support the adoption of a federal law, it is subjected to a popular vote.

Switzerland's federal structure allows for considerable cantonal involvement in its political institutions.



Federated states may be known by different names, according to their federations. In Switzerland they are called cantons, in Germany and Austria, "Länder"; in the United States, "states"; in Canada, "provinces".

