

The 2015 elections: how the political parties view science

Political parties vote two-dimensionally, says the political geographer Michael Hermann. This fact is also reflected in the answers party bosses gave to four questions on science policy that Horizons asked them. *By Valentin Amrhein and Daniel Saraga*

When it comes to science policy, where do the front lines lie in our party-political spectrum? Primarily along two dimensions, says the political geographer Michael Hermann. The first dimension involves science funding. Here, the left says invest, while the right says economise. The second dimension no longer functions according to the left/right pattern, and Hermann describes it as the 'Physicists' dilemma', in reference to the play by Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Should scientists do what's doable, just because they can? When deciding whether political decisions should be made according to scientific possibility or the needs of society, often those on the far right join up with those on the far left.

Some two-thirds of the politicians in the National Council and the Council of States have a university degree. "But given today's state of permanent election fever, it's not academic politicians who're in demand in parliament, but communications experts", says Hermann. "Furthermore, there's a shift taking place away from facts and towards opinions".

In order for our readers to form their own opinions, here are the answers party executives gave to four questions asked by Horizons, along with the results of four votes in the National Council.

Politicians offer their opinion

ScienceDebate is a joint initiative of the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, the SNSF and the online electoral assistance organisation Smartvote. ScienceDebate drew up 13 questions on science policy and put them to Swiss politicians. Its website www.sciencedebate.ch features the arguments of party chairpersons and their executive committees, along with answers from all candidates standing for seats on the National Council in 2015, listed according to their respective parties.

Science policy in 200 characters

The presidents of the seven biggest Swiss political parties

Should the economic usefulness of research projects be given greater consideration when federal subsidies are being awarded?

Should the government and the authorities have a greater influence on the type of research that is publicly funded?



Martin Bäumlé
Green-Liberal Party (GLP)

Economic considerations should be an important criterion when awarding federal subsidies, although the funding of pure research may be excluded from this requirement.

In defining the criteria for allocating research monies, politicians already have sufficient influence on what research is subsidised today.



Toni Brunner
Swiss People's Party (SVP)

Research shouldn't be an end in itself; it should be applied research. The societal and in particular the economic use of research projects should be given greater consideration.

Research is not a core responsibility of the state. The state should rather provide favourable conditions for researchers instead of pouring too much taxpayers' money into it.



Christophe Darbellay
Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP)

Research and innovation can and must serve economic progress and enhance our level of knowledge. In this sense, the economic usefulness of research projects should be borne in mind.

No. The federal government gives roughly a quarter of its research and development funding to the SNSF, which then uses it to subsidise research. That shouldn't change.



Martin Landolt
Conservative Democratic Party (BDP)

By definition, research projects don't demonstrate their concrete economic usefulness right from the start. Any other criteria would impose too great a limitation on the breadth of research.

The BDP welcomes research programmes in the field of renewable energies, for example. But we have to guarantee the right balance between state influence and research freedom.



Christian Levrat
Social Democratic Party (SP)

The distribution of federal subsidies for research purposes is well balanced today. A greater orientation towards economic usefulness would call research freedom into question.

There are already sufficient instruments to implement research focus programmes that are democratically legitimate and that respect the current and future needs of society.



Philipp Müller
Free Democratic Party (FDP)

There is usually no recognisable economic use in pure research, which is why scientists, not politicians, should decide which research projects have the greatest potential.

The independence of research (and teaching!) is a precious asset and must be guaranteed. All political influence must be prevented.



Regula Rytz
Green Party (GPS)

No. But research must help us to confront the challenges of our century. These include our dwindling resources and climate change with its far-reaching consequences.

Today, the Federal Council is already able to initiate national research programmes and research focus areas that investigate the core problems of our society. That's how things should remain.

Should nationality play a role when appointing professorial chairs?

When appointing professors, the candidates should be judged on their expert knowledge and their pedagogical skills, not their nationality.

A constitutional article was approved last year that confirms our right to manage immigration by prioritising Swiss nationals and by means of quotas. This must also apply to universities as employers.

Fundamentally, nationality should not play any role. But if professors are available who are of Swiss nationality and who possess the desired qualifications, then they should be given preference.

It is fundamental that research institutions should not be hindered by rigid quotas when recruiting personnel.

Rather not. The goal must be to have the best people working at our universities.

Teaching autonomy must also apply to the appointment of teaching staff. If Switzerland wants to retain its leading position in research, then it should appoint the best, most suitable people.

No. Research and teaching are international today. Only the job profile and the applicant's qualifications are relevant. But we must invest in young talent and the better representation of women.

Should scientific findings play a greater role in politics?

Evidence-based policy is to be recommended. Science can help to show politicians the reality of circumstances and possible paths to solutions.

Science, as part of society, should continue to bring us its findings, its concerns and its proposed solutions, though in the knowledge that there is no such thing as a uniform scientific opinion.

Scientific findings should play a role in politics, but they must be discussed in a societal and economic context. This is where the role of politics begins.

It would be good if politics made more use of scientific findings in order to find sustainable solutions.

Scientific findings are an important prerequisite of political decision-making. The freedom of politicians to take decisions is just as important as freedom in research and teaching.

More science and less ideology would do parliament good. But science itself has to enter into a far more intensive dialogue with the people – for they are sovereign under the Swiss Constitution.

Scientific findings are already important today and are included in politics. But many questions don't have a clear scientific answer.

For more extensive answers and other questions, please go to www.sciencedebate.ch

Photos: Parliamentary Service, 3003 Bern

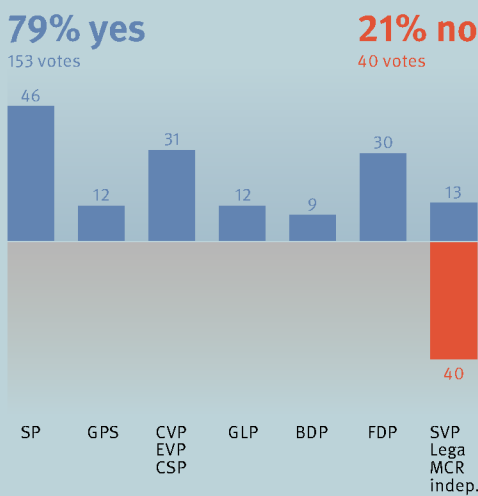
Votes in the National Council on science policy matters

In the last legislative period, ending in spring 2015, there were 106 votes in the National Council in the field of science and research. We have chosen four votes that were particularly relevant for Swiss scientists.

PARTICIPATION IN HORIZON 2020

Swiss participation in the EU research programme, to the tune of CHF 4.4 billion, means that Swiss researchers can apply for EU grants.

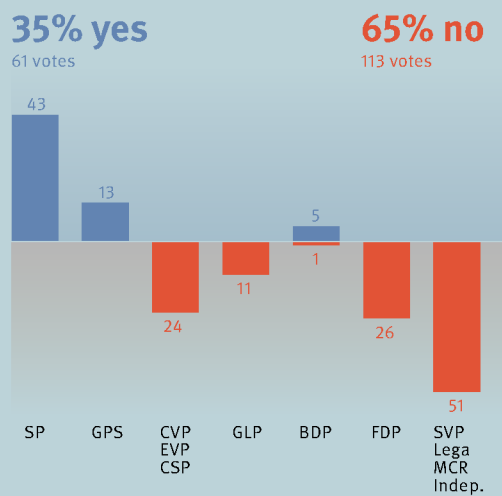
Supporting research and innovation in the years 2014–2020 (27. 9. 2013, reference 13.022-2)



MODERNISATION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

A national action plan will help to modernise research facilities in the social sciences and create longer-term research positions.

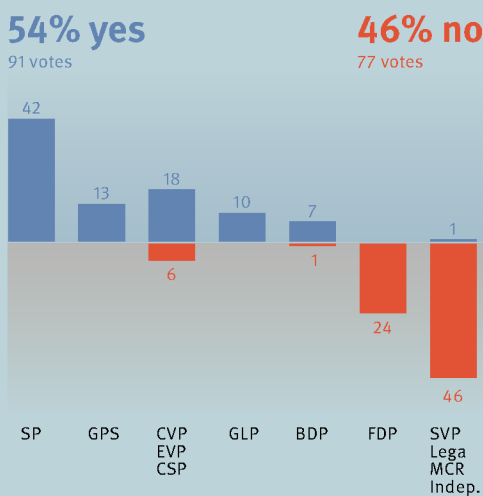
Modernising and developing research in the social sciences (19. 3. 2014, reference 12.3217)



RESEARCHING OFF-PATENT DRUGS

Funding for studies on drugs for which the patents have expired and which are therefore no longer the subject of research.

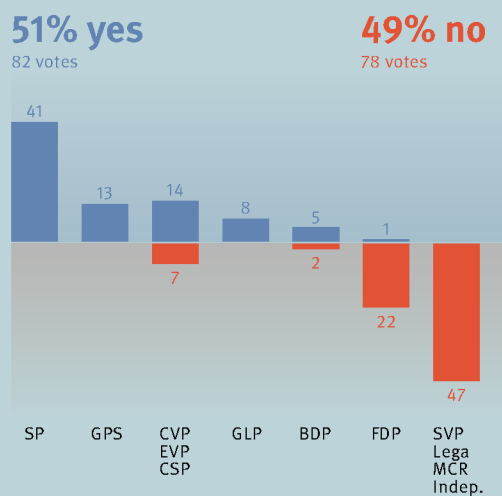
Reliable decision criteria for pharmaceutical therapy (9. 3. 2015, reference 14.4007)



REMODELLING ACADEMIC CAREER STRUCTURES

A programme should be developed for remodelling career structures for scientific and scholarly staff at Swiss universities.

Funding for emerging researchers in Switzerland (9. 3. 2015, reference 15.3000)



The details of these legislative proposals can be found by entering the respective reference number on the following website: <http://bit.ly/parlsci>