



IDHEAP

POLICY BRIEF

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The aim behind IDHEAP policy briefs is to make the general public aware of scientific research conducted at IDHEAP, underlining its pluridisciplinarity and multidisciplinary, and bringing out its implications for public policy.

This second number focuses on monitoring of the three institutional levels of Switzerland. The first article looks at the way in which the Federal Council followed the recommendations of the scientific advisory council during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors conduct a textual analysis to ascertain the extent of concordance between the official communiqués of both bodies. The second article summarizes an initiative to monitor the efficiency of cantons. On the basis of a broad spectrum of cantonal data on resources consumed and services provided, the authors propose a synthesizing indicator for analysing the evolution of cantonal efficiency over time. The third contribution presents a commune-level monitoring initiative, with data collected over a period of more than 30 years on organizational arrangements, electoral participation, political interest, satisfaction with the workings of democracy, etc. In this final contribution, the focus is on differences between communes with parliaments and those with assemblies, and on the difficulties facing these two forms of legislative system.

We think you'll find good reading here!

**The health whisperers:
scientific advisory boards
and the COVID-19 pandemic**

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The health whisperers: scientific advisory boards and the COVID-19 pandemic

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Scientific advisory boards are important sources of information for political decision-makers, supplying them with recommendations on specific problems in society. During the COVID-19 crisis, many countries set up such bodies to facilitate the formulation of policies based on scientific evidence. Whereas in general the development of such policies is guided by the “whatever works” approach, decision-makers had few certainties regarding the efficacy of interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientists advocated an agile, pragmatic style of governance, which required governments both to respond rapidly and to deal with numerous uncertainties involving various stakeholders. As a result, scientific recommendations were strongly contested in the political arena, and assessing to what extent they succeeded in influencing public policies is difficult. This study looked at the role of scientific boards during the COVID-19 pandemic, using the example of Switzerland through the **Swiss National Science Task Force**, which was set up in the early weeks of the COVID-19 crisis.

Background to the study

We compared the political recommendations of the Swiss National COVID-19 Task Force, which supplied information to the Swiss government from the start of the pandemic, with the federal government's responses, and discuss the possible relationships between the two organizations. The institutionalization of scientific evidence in the political system favours its transformation into public policies, but there is no guarantee that the evidence will be used. Although science plays a major role in the development of contemporary public policies, the formulation of evidence-based policies has been called into question with the rise of numerous populist movements and the potential emergence of a post-truth era. These developments aside, it seems that science made a comeback during the COVID-19 pandemic. Political actors took a greater interest in the opinions of epidemiologists, virologists and public health specialists, and consulted them repeatedly. Scientists are often seen as independent experts who seek the truth using rigorous, systematic methods that allow no interference with objective reality, although Lambright (2008 : 6)¹ asserts that when scientists come out of their laboratories to advance political positions, they can behave in the same way as other interest

¹ Lambright, W. H. (2008). Government and science: A troubled, critical relationship and what can be done about it. *Public Administration Review*, 68(1), 5-18.



“Did Switzerland rely heavily on scientific boards during the first wave of the pandemic?”



groups, attempting to influence public policy. But whereas scientists follow fixed rules that produce scientific evidence, politicians' decisions can be influenced by pressure from voters, public opinion and contributions to electoral campaign funds.

Methodological process

From a methodological point of view, we conducted a quantitative text analysis. In order to compare scientific reports (N=22) with government press releases (N=25) between April and July 2020, we analysed political memoranda published by the Task Force and official press releases from the Federal Office of Public Health and the Swiss Federal Council, together with the latter's policy briefs. We then conducted a keyword analysis based on the occurrence and frequency of use of certain terms in both types of documents available to us.

This process consisted in identifying the average and relative occurrences of certain terms (for example, masks) in order to highlight overlap between the recommendations of the Task Force and government responses.

Results and discussion

Summative analysis of relative word frequency shows that the terms used by the Task Force are almost exclusively related to health measures and issues. As for federal government press releases, these show a greater variation in terms of words used, despite the emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic. The attention paid by the federal government to various health questions is overall less substantial than that shown in the Task Force's policy briefs. However, given the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and the diversity of its various stakeholders, the federal government was obliged to act in a rapidly changing context, while taking health, economic and societal interests into consideration. Overall, we find that political issues addressed by the Federal Council are identical to those discussed by the Task Force in reports, as the graphic below illustrates. In the case in point, even though the intensity of use of the word "mask" differs between the two types of documents, the dynamics are comparable, denoting a form of convergence.

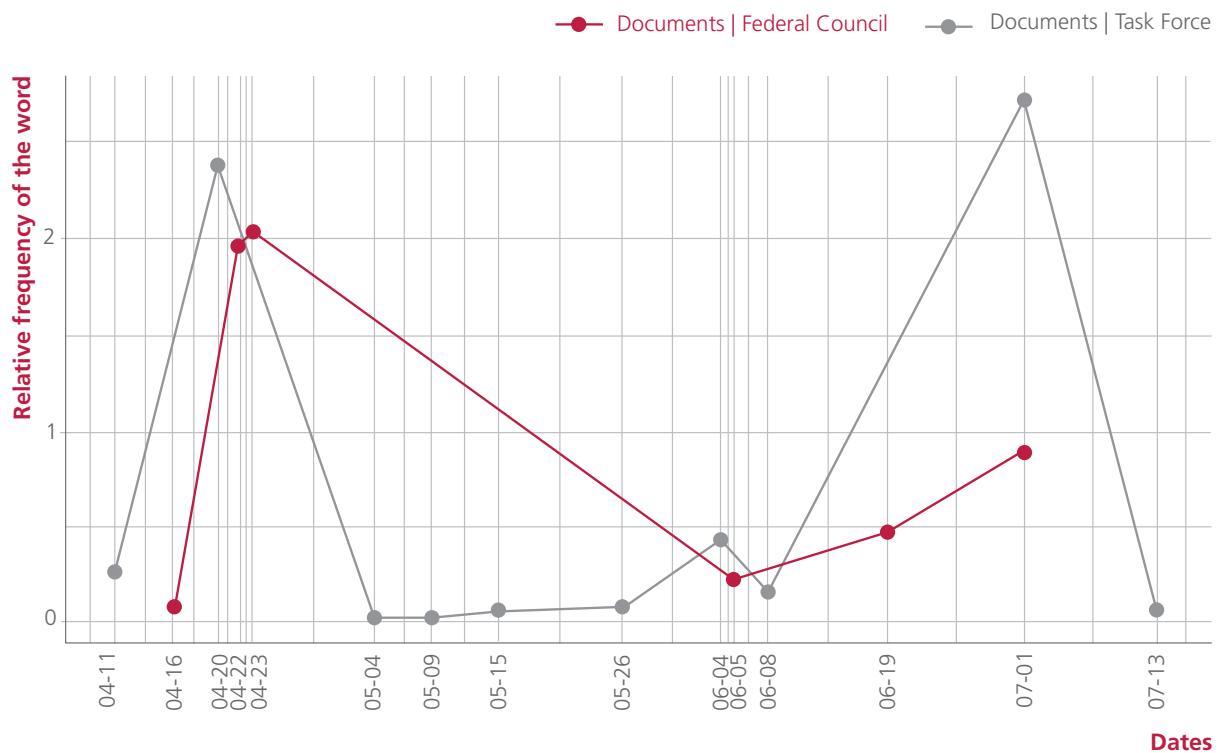


Figure 1 | Changes in the relative frequency of the word "mask"

Reference

Bundi, P., Cahlikova, T. & Moulay, L. (2021). The Health Whisperers: Scientific Advisory Boards and the COVID-19 Pandemic. Document de travail non publié. Université de Lausanne.

Monitoring the efficiency of Swiss cantons, 2009 to 2018

Public Policy & Evaluation and Public Finance units

Prof. Pirmin Bundi and Prof. Nils Soguel

Efficiency of public service delivery: a major issue

Are public services delivered efficiently? The question is often asked, but has not been hitherto examined in a systematic manner. To address this gap, two IDHEAP research units (Public Policy & Evaluation and Public Finance) in association with PwC (a firm of auditors) launched an initiative **to monitor** the efficiency of cantons.

The objective is to monitor, at short intervals, how the efficiency of cantons is evolving to help make the State more efficient. Various service deliveries were tracked in this study. The 2021 edition included training, social assistance and roads. The initiative is not a simple, static **benchmarking** exercise, but a dynamic examination over the course of a decade.

Data envelopment analysis

A broad spectrum of cantonal data on inputs (resources consumed) and **outputs** (services) allows us to go further than previous efforts. Past studies considered a single dimension of performance (often volume) and compared it to a single type of total expenditure. It is preferable, however, to examine various dimensions, including quality aspects. Moreover, expenditures may be of different kinds and be substituted for each other—personnel and infrastructure, for example. Faced with this complexity, the DEA (**Data Envelopment Analysis**) estimation method combines several dimensions (quantity and quality) and several inputs to arrive at an efficiency rating (Figure 1).

This makes it possible to determine whether the volume of inputs consumed is appropriate or relatively high in view of the observed outputs. Ideally, 100% efficiency should be attained. In reality, the benchmark value is provided by the most productive canton. The other cantons achieve a rating indicating the extent to which their efficiency can be improved. Since the distribution of tasks between cantons and their communes is not uniform, communes' services and expenses are included where necessary.

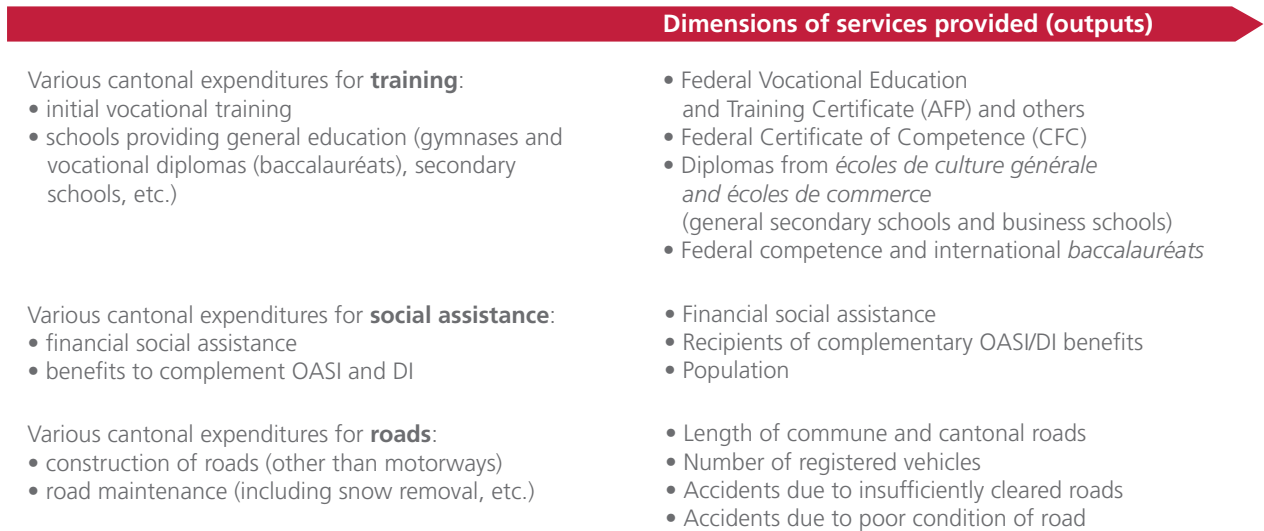


Figure 1 | Efficiency monitoring covers three areas and encompasses several dimensions of services

Results that reveal a potential for improved efficiency

The three areas examined represent 55% of cantonal and communal expenses, a total of CHF 4.6 billion (2018 figures). The average efficiency rating stood at 80% 2018 for training, 74% for social assistance and 67% for roads.

Regarding training, Figure 2 focuses on the most recent changes, between 2017 (red circles) and 2018 (grey bars). The efficiency rating changes significantly, especially in cantons 18, 22, 17, 8 and 1 (from left to right). In some cases, there is barely any change in efficiency (20, 14, 25, 5, 4). As in the other areas analysed, there is substantial heterogeneity between cantons, regardless of the year.

Since 2009, in the area of training (evolution not represented in Figure 2), the inter-cantonal average stands at about 80%. No canton succeeds in clearly and definitively surpassing the 90% efficiency rating. The maximum achieved by a canton is 93%. In contrast, cantons that recorded relatively low efficiency ratings in the past—the historical minimum standing at 62%—have improved appreciably. However, nobody should rest on their laurels: the cantons (bars) on the right of Figure 2 achieved a lower efficiency rating in 2018 than in 2017.

Cantons are not named, because the point is to inform them, and not to stigmatize them. But every canton knows the figure assigned to it. Complementary analyses are needed to determine whether non-controllable external factors explain a low efficiency rating or whether processes could be optimized.

“The objective is to monitor, at short intervals, how the efficiency of cantons is evolving to help make the State more efficient.”

Of course, **monitoring** remains dependent upon data. Our initiative was thus able to identify gaps in existing statistics—a welcome incentive to complete the data necessary for appropriate guidance of the public policies concerned.

Detailed results of 2021 monitoring are available on Serval - Monitoring de l'efficience des cantons suisses (unil.ch)

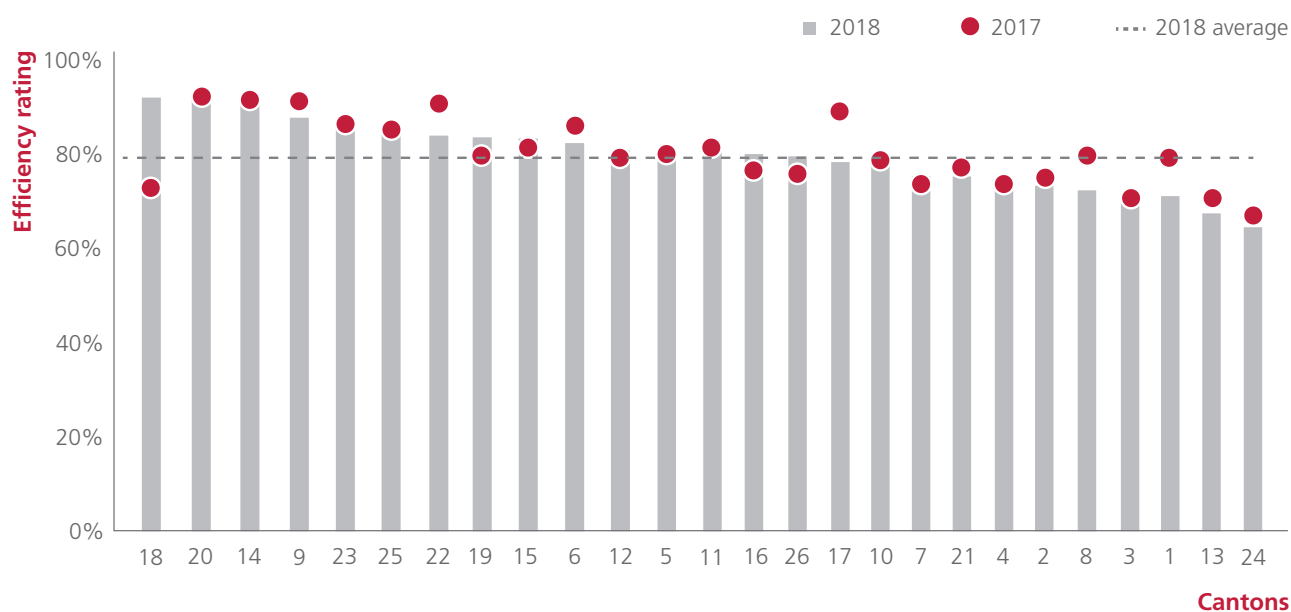


Figure 2 | The efficiency rating of cantons in the area of training varied between 90% and 65% in 2018, with an average of approximately 80%

Monitoring of Swiss communes

Administration and Institutions unit Prof. Andreas Ladner

Since 1988, IDHEAP has participated with other university institutions in the monitoring of Swiss communes. From 2006 onwards, it has played a key role in these investigations, which are conducted at more or less regular intervals with commune secretaries throughout the country. Response rates of over 80% are achieved, and these investigations cover all communes.

In addition, research projects based on the data collected have aroused great interest in the communities concerned, for example in the commune administrations, among local politicians and in the media¹. Swiss communes have seen substantial changes: the number of communes has fallen by 28% in 30 years (from 3021 in 1990 to 2172 in 2021), communes have stepped up their collaboration with other communes and with the private sector, and they have embarked on reforms of their governance and their administration.

But communes hold out particular interest from the point of view of political and administrative science. They are often considered as a vast laboratory of institutions.

Parliament or assembly? Two diverging concepts of democracy

The design and management of the political system form part of the organizational autonomy of communes, but while some cantonal legislatures regulate everything in detail, others limit themselves to minimum requirements. The structure of legislative power thus varies both between communes in a single canton and between communes in different cantons. Communes may have either a communal assembly, or a communal parliament. In the first case, citizens meet twice a year or more frequently in a room in the commune to discuss communal affairs directly and vote on them. In the second case, an elected representative body plays the role of intermediary between the executive and administration on the one hand and electors on the other hand.

¹ A complete database and a description of variables can be found at <http://www.andreasladner.ch/uebersicht.htm>.

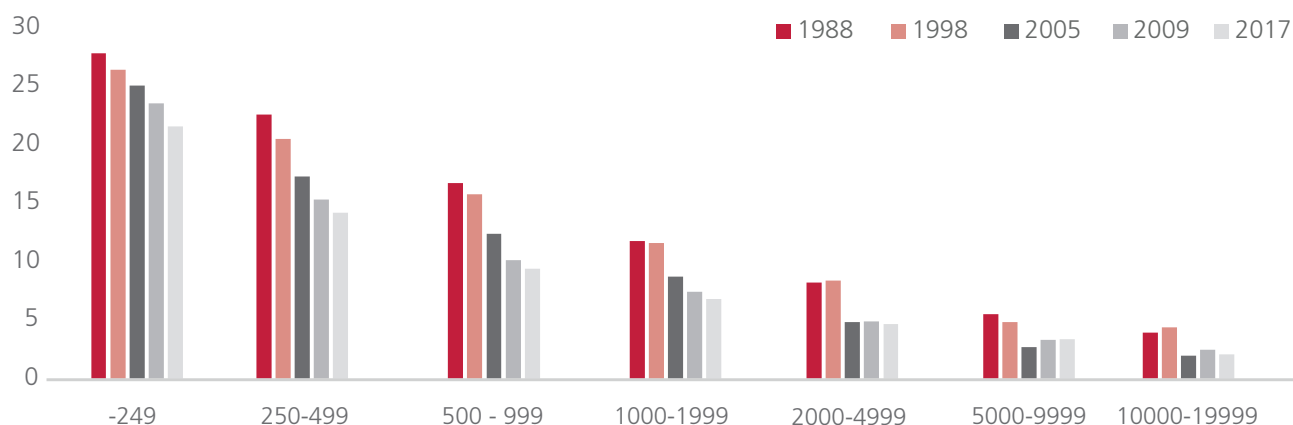


Figure 1 | Participation in communal assemblies (ordinates), by year, according to commune size (abscissas)

It is not easy to determine the total number of communal parliaments in Switzerland, because there is no updated official list. In the early 1990s, our research identified 493 communal parliaments, representing 16.3% of communes at the time. More recent figures (2019) showed 461 communes having a parliament, approximately 21% of communes. The increased percentage of communes with a parliament is due to the disappearance of small communes with communal assemblies. Only in isolated cases has there been a transition from the assembly system to the parliament system.

It should also be noted that the Latin part of Switzerland has a preference for communal parliaments. There, even the smallest communes frequently have a communal council, which can be equated with a communal parliament. This type of legislative body is moreover obligatory in Neuchâtel and Geneva cantons. At the local level, therefore, Latin Switzerland is more attuned to representative democracy than direct democracy. In German Switzerland, it is mostly the larger communes that have a parliament.

What are the effects?

Which form of democracy proves more efficient? Our investigations found there is higher electoral participation in communes with parliaments than in comparable communes with assemblies. Interest in politics also appears to be greater. On the other hand, satisfaction with the workings of democracy is no higher in communes with parliaments, and there is no difference with regard to satisfaction with services and infrastructure. It is not therefore possible to speak of the superiority of either of these two institutional arrangements, but rather of two different systems that produce similar results.

“They are often considered as a huge laboratory of institutions.”

However, the two forms of legislative system must each face their own particular problems: low participation in communal assemblies, and the difficulty of finding competent, motivated members for parliaments (see Figures 1 and 2).

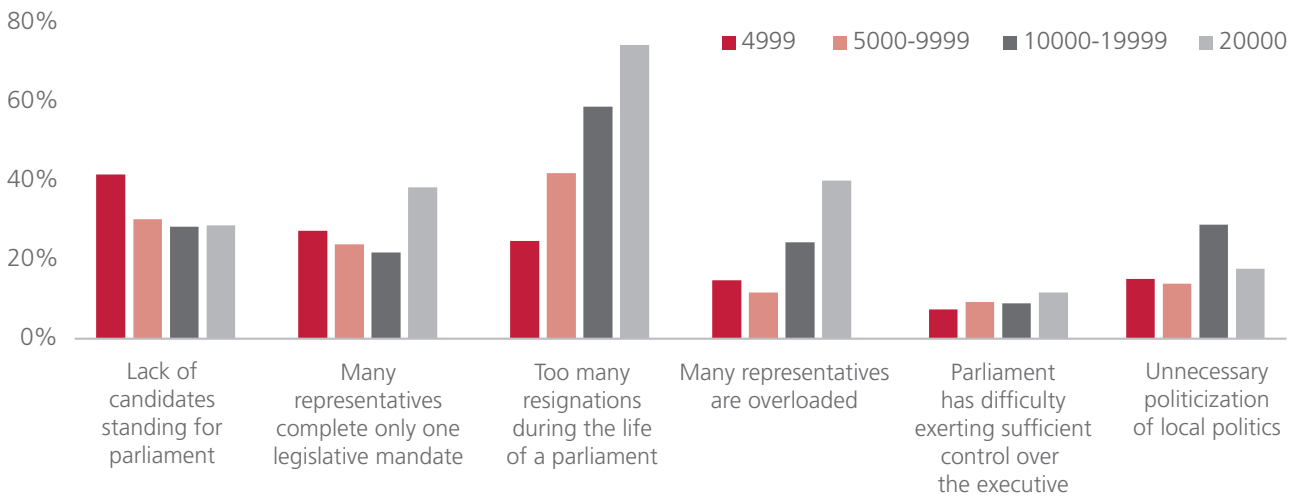


Figure 2 | The various problems facing parliaments in recent years, by size of commune

Reference

Ladner, A. & Haus, A. (2021). Aufgabenerbringung der Gemeinden in der Schweiz. Organisation, Zuständigkeiten und Auswirkungen. Cahier de l’IDHEAP

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