

Mr Vatter, who will be the new social democratic Federal Councillor?

Adrian Vatter, Redaktion DeFacto
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On Wednesday, 13 December 2023, the Federal Assembly of Switzerland will elect the Federal Council for the next four years. The six current members of the Federal Council are likely to be re-elected. More interesting is which SP politician will be elected as Alain Berset's successor. Adrian Vatter answers the most important questions.

Interview series
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What is the most important requirement to be elected to the Federal Council?

Adrian Vatter: Apart from the right party affiliation, the most important requirement is active membership of the electoral body. National Councillors and Councillors of States almost only elect their own kind to the government.

It is very difficult for outsiders to be elected as they lack the network and personal contacts in the Federal Assembly.

Which candidates are most likely to be elected to the Federal Council by parliament – the most competent, the most popular or the most sociable?

With regard to the most important character trait, which is decisive for the members of parliament when electing a new member of the Federal Council, there is a clear empirically supported answer: sociability not only increases the chances of nomination, but also the chances of being elected. On election day, the kind and nice people get the most votes. The recent successes of the cheerful Elisabeth Baume-Schneider at the expense of the seemingly reserved Eva Herzog and the always friendly Albert Rösti once again confirmed the agreeableness hypothesis.

What qualities does a member of the Federal Council need to have?

Because of the way our government is organised, there are four important qualities for a member of the Federal Council. Firstly, you need a certain degree of compatibility and sociability, otherwise the principle of collegiality won't work. Secondly, assertiveness is important because you also head a department with sometimes thousands of employees. Thirdly, you have to have communication skills and empathy, because you have to convince the people and the cantons on complex issues. What you also need, perhaps the most important thing of all: "a thick skin". One unifying characteristic of Swiss state leadership continues to stand out: members of the Federal Council display a strikingly strong character trait that corresponds to the characteristics of the so-called "resilient personality type": a very high level of robustness. Federal Councillors have a very high level of psychological resilience, which allows these people, who are under constant pressure, to get up again quickly and carry on even after setbacks, attacks and defeats. Finally, a college of seven equal members also requires qualities such as the ability to work in a team, a willingness to compromise and conciliatory behaviour, while there is hardly any room for headstrong and dominant loners.

What are the differences between the two candidates nominated by the Social Democrats? Where do you see advantages and disadvantages for the two?

The Social Democratic Party is putting forward two strong candidates with different profiles. This means that it is actually offering the Federal Assembly a choice. Not so much in terms of their political stance, but more in terms of their background and experience. Beat Jans brings cantonal executive leadership and many years of experience in the National Council. He is a safe bet. He also comes from a region that has not been represented in the Federal Council for decades. Jon Pult is a talented communicator and would ensure that the Federal Council is visibly rejuvenated and thus represent the interests of the younger generation. The disadvantage for both: they are both a red flag with the powerful farmers' lobby.

Why is Daniel Jositsch and not Evi Allemann or Roger Nordmann considered much more qualified by the media?

Philip Loser gave a very revealing answer to this question in the Tages Anzeiger: "Jositsch is a prime example of mutual projection: for years, the (Zurich) media have attributed an almost superhuman competence to the Zurich Councillor of States and law professor. But have these superhuman abilities of Daniel Jositsch actually been proven?" In other words: if Jositsch did not come from the city of Zurich, where Switzerland's most important leading media are based, he would not have been so idealised.

Were you surprised that Evi Allemann didn't make it onto the ticket?

Yes, because the Social Democrat parliamentary group of the self-declared equality party consists of a majority of women.

Could a third person stand a chance of winning the seat on the Federal Council?

No.

The Greens want to attack the current FDP Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis. Do they have a chance with this plan?

To be elected as a Federal Councillor, you need 124 votes. So it won't work without alliance partners. It is not enough for the Greens to have only the Social Democrats at their side. As long as the political centre is not prepared to support the Greens' attack, the calculation is simple: the votes will not come together. With this candidature, however, the Greens are staking their claim and pointing out that an important societal force is not represented in the Federal Council.

The historian Urs Altermatt has put forward the idea of a rotating Federal Council seat between the Centre Party and the FDP. What do you think of this idea?

The parties are similarly strong, which speaks in favour of this option. However, I see two objections: firstly, it is not so easy to implement in practice. Secondly, if the aim is to represent the political forces as fairly and equitably as possible, then the seventh seat should not go to one of these parties, which with less than around 15 per cent of the electorate are actually entitled to just one seat – but rather to the party that has just under 10 per cent, namely the Greens.

How important is a candidate's regional affiliation for election to the Federal Council?

In recent years, the regional aspect has tended to become less important. Other factors such as personality profile, gender and political position have become more important. After the surprising non-election of Eva Herzog, the fact that Basel was disavowed last time and that Switzerland's second strongest economic region should perhaps also be given a chance will play into the minds of some. But I wouldn't say that this will be the decisive factor. In Beat Jans' case, there are other factors that speak in his favour, above all his executive experience and his many years of experience as a National Councillor.

Beat Jans or Jon Pult: who has the better chance of being elected?

In contrast to previous elections, I don't see a clear favourite. At the moment, I see a slight advantage for Beat Jans, but I believe Jon Pult can score points at the hearings.

Adrian Vatter

Adrian Vatter studied and completed his doctorate at the University of Bern. After holding positions at various universities, including in the USA and Germany, he has been Professor of Swiss Politics since 2009 and Dean of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Bern since 2022. His research focuses on Swiss political institutions with an emphasis on federalism, direct democracy and consociational democracy. He is the author of the book „[Der Bundesrat. Die Schweizer Regierung](#)“, NZZ Libro (2020).

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