

# Government Trust in Times of Crisis

International crises are a stress test for governments, offering opportunities to rally citizens but also risking dissatisfaction with tough policy choices. While trust in government has fluctuated in many European countries during recent times of uncertainty, the Swiss government has benefited from a reservoir of trust providing a buffer against dissatisfaction.

By Enzo Nussio

Nobel laureate Kenneth Arrow understood trust as a “lubricant” that makes social interaction smoother. Trust in government is thus a key resource for the functioning of society. While times of stability can contribute to trust building, times of crisis put pressure on trust relations.

Multiple international crises have shaken European countries in recent years, including transnational terrorism, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the 2022 Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Governments were forced to act and risked dissatisfying their constituents with potentially unpopular choices. In this environment, trust in government has been volatile and ultimately declining in several European countries. This has not been the case in Switzerland where trust has remained high. This analysis examines the factors that explain this diverging trend and holds important implications for how trust in government will develop in future crises.

## Government Trust in Switzerland

Switzerland has long been a high-trust country; citizens tend to trust each other and their government. The two most trusted state institutions in Switzerland are the police and the courts (see graph on p.2). The Federal Council is the third most trusted institution, except shortly after the beginning of the Covid pandemic when it received a trust boost. The least trusted po-



The Swiss Federal Council on a visit to the Grand Chalet in Rossinière, Vaud, in July 2021.  
Nicola Pitaro / DDPS

litical institutions are the political parties. This pattern resembles other European democracies as parties are associated with competition rather than unity and thus perceived more negatively than the justice system and the government who are seen as working for all.

Along with some Nordic countries, Switzerland has long figured among the leading nations in terms of trust in government in

Europe. There are many reasons for these high levels of trust. As in the Nordic countries, Switzerland has a stable system of rule of law with fair procedures, provides public services efficiently, and has a strong “civic culture”, resulting in a large consensus between citizens and state about the core values that should govern society. Classical political science research by Gary Almond and Sidney Verba identified precisely this “civic culture” as the foundation

for functioning democracies. Switzerland further benefits from direct democratic participation opportunities, federalism, and a consociational government involving the four major political parties.

However, it is evident that not all Swiss citizens trust their institutions equally. As in other countries, factors like education, age, ideology, rural or urban origin, and social standing influence individual levels of trust. Few citizens feel alienated from government and ready to act against it with the shooting rampage in the cantonal parliament of Zug in 2001, perpetrated by a disgruntled citizen who killed 14 politicians, being an extreme outlier. There is thus broad consensus about the benefits of the current political system and a deep commitment to a Swiss democratic creed.

### Effects of Crisis on Trust

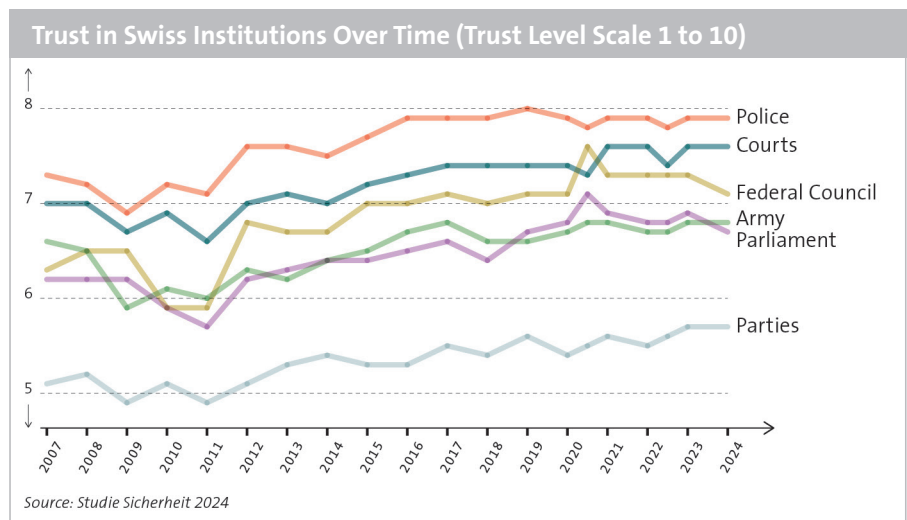
The relationship between citizens and their governments is put under pressure during times of crisis, with two common opposing reactions. On the one hand, crises can produce a sudden increase in trust in government, the most famous example being the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US which led to a steep increase in support for the government led by President George W. Bush. This pattern corresponds to what political scientist John Mueller called a “rally around the flag”, which can happen after an internationally relevant crisis that is specific, dramatic, and sharply focused.

On the other hand, crises can undermine trust. Many crises are protracted rather than sharply focused. During such protracted crises, governments are pressed to

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act at some point and the effects of their choices are hard to foresee, including whether they will satisfy their citizens. The response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which started as a focusing event but persisted for an extended period, eventually led to dissatisfaction and distrust in government in several countries.

Before examining recent cases, it should be noted that changes in trust levels are hard to attribute to specific crises, as they always result from multiple factors. Domestic political developments can have severe conse-



quences, such as Austria’s 2019 “Ibiza affair” which undermined trust in politics in general. This began with the publication of video footage showing then vice-chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache willing to engage in corruption. Besides domestic politics, the economic climate can also dampen trust. This happened in several European countries during the Great Recession after the financial crisis of 2008 with most countries seeing a dip in trust in government at this time, as shown in the graph on p.3. Trust in the Swiss Federal Council was never lower than during the financial crisis (see graph on p.2).

In any case, international crises are influential focal points for citizens’ views of their governments and allow for a comparative analysis. Recent times have been marked by multiple crises; some authors even speak of a “polycrisis”. To illustrate how government trust developed in Switzerland and across Europe, this analysis focuses on three recent crises: transnational terrorism, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

### Transnational Terrorism

Transnational terrorism has been an important concern since 9/11. In Europe, the perception of an immediate threat, particularly from Islamist extremists, was most salient from 2014 to 2017, when the so-called Islamic State attracted foreign fighters from Europe and perpetrated a wave of attacks in France, Belgium, Germany, the UK, and other countries. Terrorists have not staged major attacks on Swiss

soil, but fear of terrorism was clearly elevated during this period.

The Swiss government’s reaction to the terrorist wave was low key. It initially drew on increased domestic collaboration between cantonal security forces, led by the Swiss Security Network, and international collaboration with security agencies. A National Action Plan was adopted in 2017 and four years later, a new law allowing for additional counterterrorism measures was approved by the Swiss population in a referendum vote.

The Swiss reaction to terrorism stands in stark contrast to the highly visible military presence around critical infrastructure in many European countries. The state of emergency, proclaimed in France after the November 2015 Paris attacks, is the most drastic measure adopted by any country in Europe. It gave the French government exceptional powers that only expired after two years. In reaction to these measures, the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on the protection of human rights expressed concern about a stigmatization of citizens of Muslim faith.

The international threat environment and the policy response did not markedly affect trust levels in Switzerland. If anything, trust in government increased during this period (see graph on p.2). However, some Swiss associated Islam with the Islamist terrorist threat; in a 2017 survey, 47 per cent stated that Islam was a threat to the security of Switzerland.

In France, there is evidence of a short-lived rally around the flag effect after the Charlie

Hebdo and the Bataclan attacks in 2015 (not visible in graph on p.3). These sharp events and the narrative of an “attack against France” produced a feeling of togetherness. However, the rally effect was likely reversed by the extraordinary response, which disgruntled significant segments of the population who felt discriminated against by the state. A later increase in trust in 2017 was due to the enthusiasm associated with the start of the presidency of Emmanuel Macron.

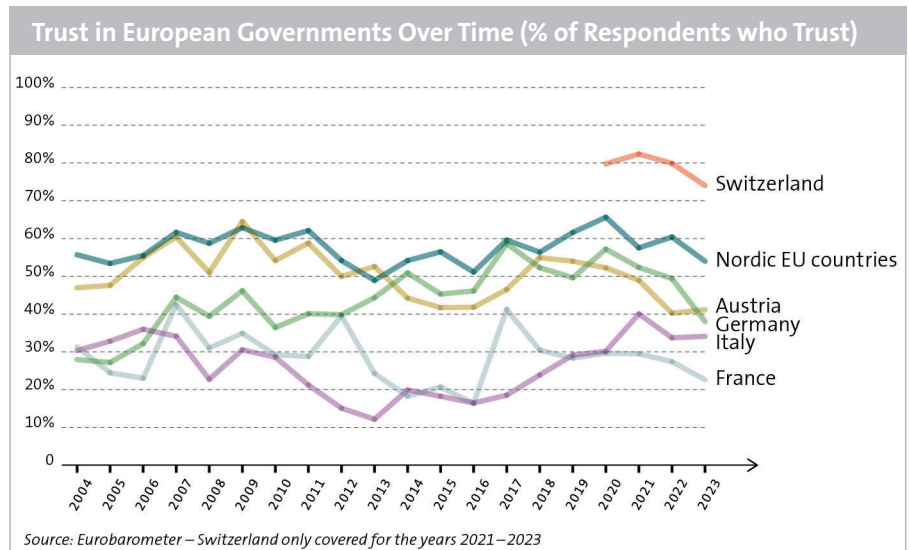
In Germany, there was no immediate rally effect after the hitherto most deadly attack on German soil, the Berlin Christmas Market attack in 2016. However, the populist right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) connected Islamist violence with the then ongoing “refugee crisis”, which involved the arrival of more than one million immigrants to Germany. Traditional parties were presented as unable to deal with the migration issue, alienating segments of the population from the federal government. A similar connection between migration and terrorism was established after the recent terror attack in Solingen where a Syrian refugee killed three and injured eight people at a city festival.

**Covid-19 Pandemic**

The Covid-19 pandemic started as a sharp international crisis, but then became protracted. The crisis was so severe that even a hands-off response – as in the case of Sweden – was perceived as a consequential policy choice.

In Switzerland, the response was based on previously adopted legislation on epidemics and was less restrictive than in most neighboring countries. A clear counterexample is Italy, perhaps the most dramatically affected country in the early stages of the pandemic. The government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was the first in Europe to severely restrict public interactions with a national lockdown.

Trust in government increased at the beginning of the pandemic in some countries, including Switzerland, but also in Italy, France, and Germany, although the yearly averages shown in the graph on page 3 may not reveal short-term changes. The initial uptick resembles the dynamics after 9/11, but the changes in trust levels were less extreme. Although citizens rallied around their governments in the face of an immediate collective threat, the lingering threat and later policy choices created a volatile



relationship between citizens and their governments in most countries.

In Switzerland, small subcultures emerged that felt alienated from government and opposed the vaccination policy, some of which have survived after the pandemic but represent a fringe community today. While Switzerland has long lived with relatively high levels of polarization in the party system, polarization has not markedly increased during times of crisis and no relevant new political challengers have emerged. This is different from other countries with increased polarization partially resulting from the pandemic.

Germany saw an initial boost in trust in government in 2020, but citizens later grew skeptical of government restrictions. The opposite dynamic holds for the AFD party: it initially lost support among voters, but then capitalized on a generalized sense of a lack of political representation. This sense of lacking representation also contributed to the recent electoral success of the new left-wing party Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW).

**Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

The Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a stark reminder of a conventional military threat within Europe. Against the backdrop of a global trend toward a fragmented world order, the year 2023 registered the highest number of armed conflicts since the end of the Second World War, including a widening crisis in

the Middle East.

As a result of the large-scale invasion, the Swiss government adopted the European Union's sanctions against Russia, in line with its practice of taking up EU sanctions on a case-by-case basis. There have also been debates about whether to reform the concept of neutrality and several reports by the Federal Council reflect the political will to intensify international security cooperation and refocus on defense. Political discussions on how to go about these issues continue, however, and the Federal Council has announced the elaboration of a Swiss security policy strategy for the first time in 2025. Overall, the Swiss response has been tempered so far, not least because strategic decisions require more time in the Swiss political system than elsewhere. This con-

**During protracted crises, governments are pressed to act and the effects of their choices are hard to foresee.**

trasts with more radical policy change in other European countries.

The traditionally neutral countries Sweden and Finland joined NATO, long considered a taboo, and chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany announced a “Zeitenwende” (historic turning point), implying deep changes to come for German security policy, against the opposition of populist parties on the right and left. In Italy, the inclusion of populist parties in government

coalitions has also affected foreign policy choices but in a different way, as renowned commentators have noted. While Italian coalition partners have traditionally agreed on key foreign policy issues, recent coalition partners have pursued rival goals, which has become most evident since the Russian invasion.

The Russian large-scale invasion has not affected the generally high levels of trust in government in Switzerland (see graph on p.2). While the sense of security is somewhat shaken among citizens, Switzerland is not immediately threatened by a conventional military attack. Also, Swiss public opinion is adapting to the changed international environment and signals some

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openness to possible policy changes. Trust in government in the Nordic countries remained generally high after the decision to join NATO due to democratic decision-making procedures and major changes in security preferences (the 2023 dip in the graph on p.3 is likely due to the government change in Sweden).

### The Swiss Trust Reservoir

The relationship between citizens and government has been volatile in many European countries, but Switzerland has seen stable and extraordinarily high levels of trust in government. According to a 2023 survey, Switzerland had the highest level of trust in government of all member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Anything that differentiates Switzerland from countries with more volatile trust levels can potentially account for this diverging trend, including direct democratic par-

ticipation and a consociational government, but also the absence of new populist challengers. Some may further argue that the Swiss have an insular mindset which would explain why they are less impressed by international crises, although given Switzerland's high level of internationalization, this explanation cannot account for persistently high levels of trust.

Another explanation for the stability in trust levels is trust itself. The Swiss government can count on a reservoir of trust that was filled long before the recent times of uncertainty. This reservoir of trust provides a buffer for dissatisfaction in times of crisis. Dissatisfaction with the government results from a gap between the citizens' expectations and their perception of policy choices. The higher the expectations and the more negative the perception of new policy, the greater the dissatisfaction. Swiss citizens tend to judge policy choices based on their preconceived trust in government. This creates a generally benevolent perception – a buffer – even for tough policy choices. In addition to this benevolence among citizens, the Swiss government tends to keep expectations low, as compared to other European governments with parliamentary or presidential systems pressed to make bold promises to secure reelection. This is how trust has remained high even during times of crisis.

The pandemic provides the clearest example of how the trust reservoir operates. In Switzerland, it facilitated the implementation of incisive lockdowns and vaccination policies with minor levels of protest; Swiss citizens were ready to give their government the benefit of the doubt. This was not the case in many other countries – including Switzerland's large neighboring countries – where citizens were more negatively disposed to their governments to begin with. While trust increased at the beginning of the pandemic in France, Germany,

and Italy, it quickly eroded, particularly in Germany. Governments in these countries were not able to draw on a deep trust reservoir, and citizens thus punished their governments for unpopular policies with increased distrust.

### Trust and Future Crises

The idea of a trust reservoir has important implications for future crises. Most notably, the reservoir of trust must already be in place once crisis hits. While a sudden and isolated crisis like 9/11 can boost trust in government, protracted crisis affects trust differently, because governments must make tough decisions. Applying greater importance to some interests over others can easily be interpreted as wrong from the perspective of those on the losing side, if the population does not grant the government the benefit of the doubt. In such an environment, trust becomes volatile and building sustainable trusting relationships is challenging.

Trust refers to a belief that others will act in our favor. If citizens view their governments with this disposition, they will forgive occasional mistakes, which are bound to happen during times of crisis. The prior existence of a plentiful trust reservoir is thus highly predictive of how a government will fare throughout a crisis. If it is present at the beginning of a crisis, it will not only provide governments with room for maneuver, but it may also replenish itself.

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