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The Swiss “Sonderfall”: Identifying Neutrality and its Influence on Cooperation with the European Union

Adrian Favero, University of Edinburgh

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Abstract

Switzerland remains a neutral state outside of the EU and is often described as a Sonderfall, or a “special case”. Neutrality constitutes an important factor in shaping Swiss national identity, domestic cohesion, and prospects for EU membership. However, the Federal Council’s stance on neutrality and accession to the EU differs from that of the Swiss citizens. The government sees neutrality rather as an instrument to protect the nation’s interests that would not be affected by EU membership. This paper examines if the citizens’ opinion is reflected in the government’s official policy reports, given the possibility of the electorate’s direct influence on political propositions. Analysing Eurobarometer surveys conducted in Switzerland between 1999 and 2011 and official documents published by the government within the same time period, I find that importance of neutrality for Swiss citizens is linked to feelings of attachment to Switzerland and negative attitudes towards EU membership. I also demonstrate that the government frequently ignored the citizens’ viewpoints over the last two decades. Safeguarding economic and political interests was given priority over taking into account the particular threats to identity as perceived by Swiss citizens.

Introduction

It has often been claimed that neutrality constitutes, together with direct democracy and federalism, one of the three fundamental institutions characterising the political system in Switzerland (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008, Theiler 2004, Church 2003). Since 1815 neutrality has undoubtedly been one of the cornerstones of Swiss foreign policy for the authorities. This maxim has always been adapted according to the circumstances and applied according to the best interests of the country. Neutrality was, and still is considered to sustain Switzerland’s independence as a small state and secure it from external threats. For centuries it was the “guiding principle of Switzerland’s relations with other states, polities and supra- or international organisations” (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008: 18). As a neutral country, Switzerland has only recently joined the United Nations (UN) and is unlikely to become a member of the European Union (EU). Furthermore, neutrality is not just valued for its reputed historical role in securing Switzerland’s independence but Swiss citizens believe that “belonging to a neutral

country is a central ingredient to what it means to be Swiss” (Theiler 2004:643). Even though neutrality has, nowadays, lost most of its practical importance, it is still of great significance for the Swiss. As constructivists demonstrate, the concept becomes a national symbol of identity, connecting the citizens to the state. This is further underlined by the fact that Swiss nationals still feel emotionally attached to neutrality and take it into account when they have to vote on referendums concerning foreign policies (Schwok and Bloetzer 2005: 203).

On its part, the government takes a different position. The Federal Council has continuously moved towards a more progressive foreign policy, favoured internationalism and perceived neutrality as an alterable instrument for safeguarding national interests. In its Report on Neutrality from 1993, it declared that neutrality is not supposed to be an “untouchable dogma” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1993b: 6). It occasionally needs to be reconsidered for its usefulness concerning the foreign and security policy, and as such, adjusted if necessary. Neutrality is, neither in regard to content nor durability, an unchangeable concept. Furthermore, the government clearly states that EU membership is fully compatible with Swiss neutrality as long as the EU does not become a military alliance. This stance was repeated in the Integration Report of 1999 when the government stated that “there is no doubt that the EU is legally compatible with the status of permanent neutrality” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1999: 382). However, Switzerland remains the only neutral European country which views EU membership as a potential threat to its form of neutrality (Morris and White 2011: 104).

This paper examines, how the perception of neutrality forms an identity factor, and in turn correlates with support for EU accession among Swiss citizens. This work is based on the official Eurobarometer surveys in Switzerland conducted between 1999 and 2011. This will tie in with the analysis of whether the Swiss electorate’s opinion is reflected in the government’s official position vis-à-vis EU accession published between 1999 and 2012. In the Swiss political system of direct democracy, the electorate has the last word over federal policy making. Joining a supranational community, such as the EU, is subject to approval by a double majority (majority of population and majority of cantons) in a mandatory referendum (Kriesi and Trechsel: 2008: 54). Given that the electorate has the last say over federal policy-making, their participation introduces a certain “measure of unpredictability into the decision-making process” (Kriesi and Trechsel: 2008: 56). Therefore, political actors are expected to consult the electorates’ opinion and include it in their official documents on international policies. To this end, I will be using discourse analysis in this study to examine how the “concept of neutrality has been understood and socially constructed in the past two decades” (Zakopalová 2011: 50). Through the investigation of the social and political reality depicted in the official government

reports, this analysis seeks to find out whether a possible divergence between the public perception and political elite concepts of neutrality is present.

The significance of neutrality in Switzerland

Neutrality is an important institution characterising the Swiss political system. However, it must be distinguished between the law of neutrality and Swiss neutrality policy. The law of neutrality forms part of international law. The essential rights and duties of a neutral state are laid down in the Hague Conventions of 1907 (VBS 2004: 11). The neutrality law's most important obligations are self-defence and non-participation in a war in which other states are involved. The neutral state has the right of territorial inviolability. Swiss neutrality policy can be characterised by three elements: It is permanent, armed and self-imposed. Furthermore, it is also self-defined, which allows adjustments regarding changing security situations and international law. Within this context, neutrality forms a political reality, but is also crucial as a cultural factor and is therefore important in shaping the Swiss national identity and cohesion.

The origins of Swiss neutrality can be traced all the way back to the Congress of Vienna. Following the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, France, Austria, Great Britain, Prussia and Russia recognised Switzerland's permanent neutrality and guaranteed its territorial integrity. At the national level, neutrality is cited in the Federal Constitution as an "instrument for safeguarding independence" (VBS 2004: 9). At the beginning of the Second World War, surrounded by expansionist powers, the Federal Council confirmed Switzerland's neutrality and this was recognised by the bellicose parties. On its part, Switzerland mobilised its forces to assert its independence and neutrality. Compared to other neutral states in Europe, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway (Brackett 1997: 4, DeVore and Stähli 2011: 4), Switzerland was never attacked by the Axis Powers. These historic events led to a national identity emerging from the country's history as a small state, surrounded by big powerful neighbours and fostered "a strong desire to support the policy of neutrality, demonstrating the sovereignty of the state" (Morris and White 2011: 107). During the time of the Cold War, Switzerland debated the question of joining the European Economic Community (EEC) but "neutrality was the principal reason for Switzerland remaining outside" (Morris and White 2011: 108). The country adopted an isolationist stance vis-à-vis any supra- or international organisation to avoid losing its impartiality and to prevent political conflicts. Notwithstanding the political development, the federal government submitted an application for EU membership in May 1992 but the idea of being part of the supranational organisation was met with scepticism by the Swiss population.

This resulted in a vote against membership in the EEA on 6th December 1992 by both, the population and the majority of cantons. This split vote between the political elite and the population, regarding the question of Europe, still bears a lasting effect (Linder 1997: 30, Brackett 1997: 14, Church 2003: 8). The membership application was suspended indefinitely after the EEA referendum and the government had to embark on a course of difficult bilateral negotiations to fill the gaps left by exclusion from the EEA. (Church 2003: 8). These sector-specific agreements are still controversially debated to this day.

The Swiss' fear of adjustments to direct democracy, federalism and neutrality and the loss of sovereignty in important political areas is not only based on its political history but also on its cultural background (or the lack of it). This is an essential reason for the refusal to participate more fully in Europe. Theiler (2004: 643) notes that Switzerland lacks various cultural symbols such as a common language and a common religion and thus relies on civic symbols and traditions such as direct democracy, federalism and neutrality as unifying concepts. Sztompka (2004: 5) states that collective identity, which is the frame for national identity, also means "belonging to one group and differing from another". Given the fact that the Swiss lack cultural boundaries and rely on political institutions for the construction of identity, they also point to their status as political *Sonderfall* as a means of differentiation, setting them apart from the supranational institutions surrounding the country. In most of the EU member states surrounding Switzerland, the social along with political and cultural boundaries are congruent. This became a central source of national integration. Unlike its neighbours, Switzerland is not a nation-state. It is a small multicultural federation with a population that consists of substate minorities (Kymlicka 2009) divided along language cleavages. Theiler argues that Switzerland's more monocultural neighbours are better able to tolerate a weakening of their political institutions and practices as long as they preserve their "cultural attributes as a source of internal cohesion and external demarcation" (Theiler 2004: 644). A threat to weaken Switzerland's political foundations would undermine the very concept of Switzerland itself, since these institutions are all it has. "Take away Switzerland's institutional [...] foundations and Switzerland will be no more" (Theiler 2004: 644).

Measuring neutrality, Swiss identity and Euroscepticism

My analysis begins with an attempt to descriptively measure the importance of neutrality, the feeling of national identity and Euroscepticism among Swiss citizens. Furthermore, I examine whether a high importance of neutrality is connected with a stronger feeling of

attachment to Switzerland. I also assess if an increasing importance of neutrality is related to a negative view of EU membership. The data I will be utilizing for my analyses forms part of surveys conducted in Switzerland from 1999 to 2011 titled "Eurobarometer in Switzerland". One of the main topics of these surveys concerns the relationship between the EU, Switzerland and Swiss politics. In terms of the independent variable, "Importance of neutrality" will be measured by tackling the question of how important neutrality is for the future of Switzerland. "National identity", as one of two dependent variables, is constructed by the strength of subjective attachment to Switzerland. The other variable: "EU membership" is measured by posing the question of support for EU membership if a vote were to take place on the following Sunday (the variables and their coding are listed in the annex). The data is analysed on a yearly basis and will take into account the whole period where data is available. Due to the changing nature of the random selection of people participating in the survey, the bivariate analysis will be conducted for each year and the alteration of the outcomes will be presented on a timeline.

Importance of neutrality

For the acquisition of data regarding the importance of neutrality for Swiss citizens, statistics are derived from the Eurobarometer surveys conducted between 1999 and 2007. The variable is constructed by the level of importance of neutrality. Unfortunately, the surveys conducted in 2009 and 2011 do not provide any data about the importance of neutrality. Figure 1 shows the various manifestations of the variable (in %).

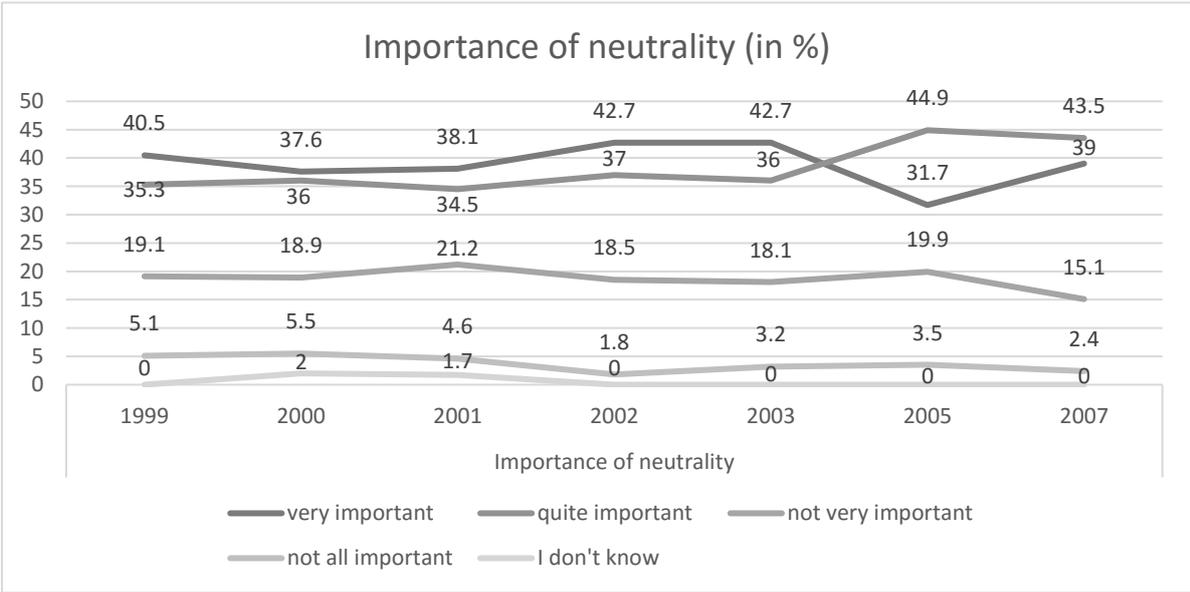


Figure 1: Importance of neutrality (in %) Source: Table by author according to the Eurobarometer in Switzerland 1999 - 2007

At first glance, it is apparent that the majority of individuals participating in the survey considers neutrality as being *very important* or *quite important*. Moreover, it is clear that the results for each opinion-group remain rather consistent over time. The figures for 2005 represent an exception as the number of people considering neutrality as being *very important* dropped from 42.7% (2003) to 31.7% (2005). Yet, the figures were restored to the pre-2005 decrease, with 39% being reported in 2007. The table also shows that the percentage of people who consider neutrality as *not being important* at all remain consistently below 6%.

Swiss identity

Data on the importance of national identity was gathered from the Eurobarometer in Switzerland between 1999 and 2011. National identity is operationalised by the degree of attachment to Switzerland. A representative sample of Swiss citizens was asked how strongly they felt in terms of attachment to Switzerland. Figure 2 presents the various opinions of the respondents.

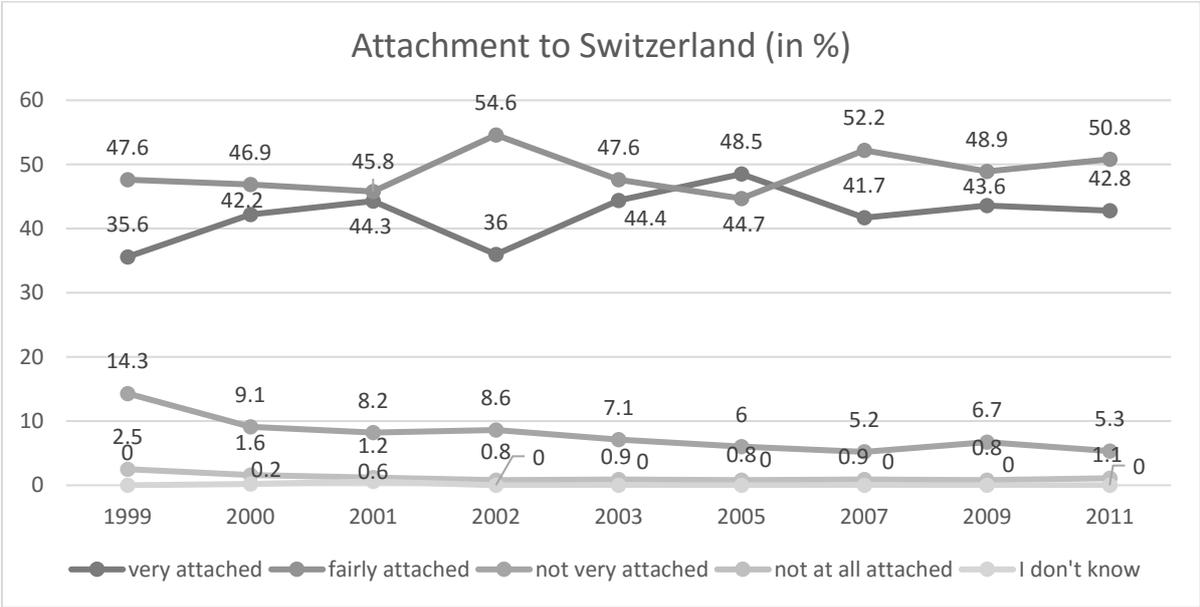


Figure 2: Attachment to Switzerland (in %) Source: Table by author according to the Eurobarometer in Switzerland 1999 - 2011

Attachment of Swiss respondents to their country is generally very high. This correlates with a study conducted by Christin and Trechsel (2002) and was also mentioned by Brackett (1997) and Morris and White (2011) who state that Swiss citizens have a strong feeling of national identity. Nonetheless, the perceived sense of attachment has changed over the years. The current state of national sentiment points to more people having become *rather fairly* as

opposed to *very attached* to Switzerland. In fact, in 2002, the numbers for respondents who felt *very attached* to Switzerland dropped down to 36% (-8.3% from the previous year) while the number of citizens who were *fairly attached* increased to 54.6% (+ 8.8%) Yet, this observation does not detract from the validity of the concept of Swiss national identity. Its importance is also highlighted by the gap between the percentages of citizens who are *fairly attached* as opposed to those who are *not very attached*.

Support for EU membership

To measure the variable for EU membership, the level of support for EU membership serves as a relevant indicator. All the data being considered in this instance was gathered from the Eurobarometer in Switzerland between 1999 and 2011. Figure 3 presents the various degrees of support for EU membership if a vote were to take place on the following Sunday. It is important to note that the percentages do not always add up to 100%. This is either due to missing responses reported in the conducted survey or the interviewee not being of voting age and thus not being included in the survey.

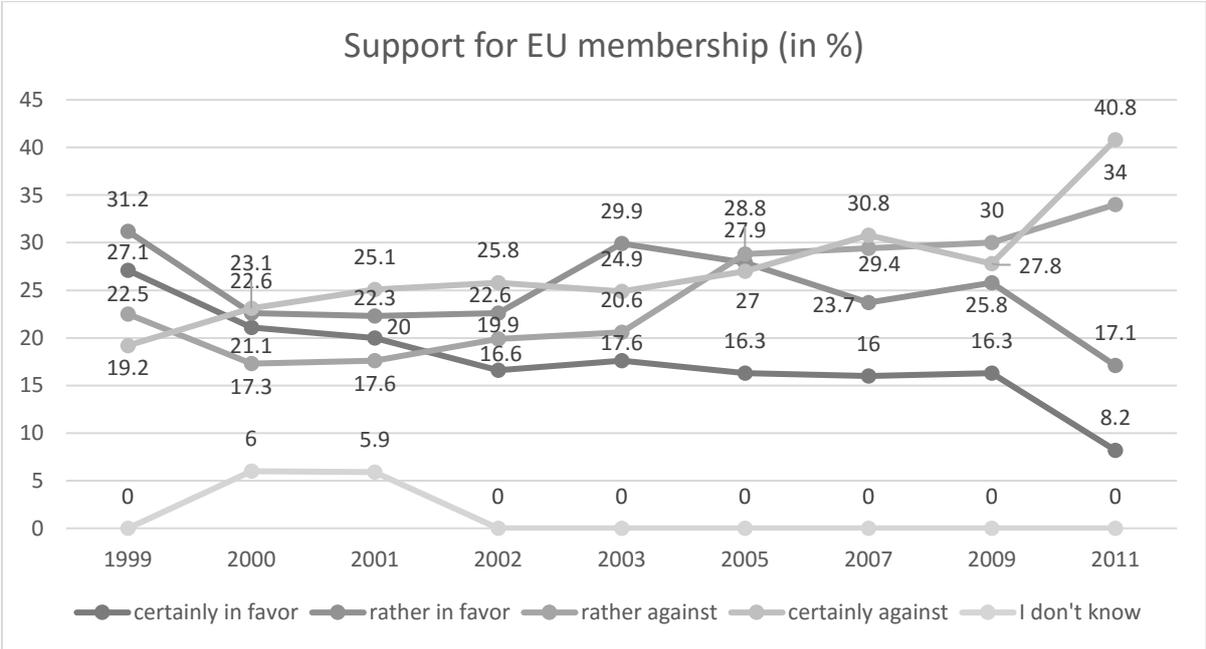


Figure 3: Support for EU membership (in %) Source: Table by author according to the Eurobarometer in Switzerland 1999 - 2011

It is evident that support for EU membership has proven to be more difficult to gauge among the interviewed citizens as opposed to the rating of importance of neutrality and attachment to Switzerland. At first glance, the numbers for citizens asked about support for EU

membership are initially more evenly distributed among the differing levels of opinion than within the other two variables mentioned above. However, the results for the varying degrees of support and opposition to the prospect of EU membership changed dramatically between 1999 and 2011. While in 1999 27.1% of the interviewed citizens stated that their vote would be *certainly in favour* of joining the EU, only 8.2% were willing to do so in 2011. At the same time, only 19.2% would have *certainly voted against* joining the Union in 1999. This has increased to 40.8% in 2011. While the two shifts present a clear decrease respectively increase, opinion of the interviewed citizens who were *rather in favour* or *rather against* EU membership seems to be less clear-cut.

Bivariate Correlation Analysis

Bivariate analysis is a simple method utilised in order to determine the empirical relationship between two variables and to measure how they both undergo changes simultaneously. A correlation considered as a measure of the relationship between two variables shall determine how strong the connection, and if possible, of what direction they are heading in. The basic questions at hand are whether the importance of neutrality is positively related to a strong feeling of national identity and a corresponding reduction in the endorsement of Switzerland's efforts to join the EU.

As mentioned above, neutrality is deemed to be a crucial cultural factor that fosters national cohesion and identity. Regarding the descriptive statistics, a positive correlation between the importance of neutrality and attachment to Switzerland as an identity factor shall be expected. The second important question to answer is the correlation of neutrality and support for EU membership. Neutrality is of great importance to many Swiss citizens but this continues to overshadow the fact that the concept has lost its original meaning and historical purpose of securing Switzerland's independence. Regardless, Morris and White state that neutrality has come to play such an important part of the national identity that it has become "difficult for the people of neutral states to risk the loss of neutrality for potential cooperation within the EU through frameworks" (2011: 109). Based on the support for EU membership, the variables are assumed to be negatively correlated every year during which the survey was conducted. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1: Correlation of Variables (according to Kendall's tau b)

	<i>Importance of Neutrality</i>						
	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>2003</i>	<i>2005</i>	<i>2007</i>
<i>Attachment to Switzerland</i>	0.176	0.226	0.244	0.129	0.148	0.218	0.233
<i>Support for EU Membership</i>	-0.168	-0.266	-0.248	-0.257	-0.269	-0.282	-0.304
<i>Observations (N)</i>	1026	1004	1001	996	1018	1056	985

Source: Table by author according to the Eurobarometer in Switzerland
Significance of all correlations: $p < 0.001$ (2-tailed)

The results featured in Table 1 demonstrate that the importance of neutrality and national identity possess a weak positive correlation. This holds true for every year evaluated in this study. At the same time, all probability values are significant on the level of $p < 0.001$. A high importance of neutrality does not invariably lead to a higher importance of national identity. Yet, it can be concluded that a higher attachment of neutrality has by all means a positive correlation with national identity. Table 1 also illustrates the correlation between importance of neutrality and support for EU membership. Based on the theoretical background, the coefficients were assumed to be negatively correlated every year during which the survey was conducted. In other words, the trend points to the rise in importance of neutrality by Swiss citizens and is supplemented by a fall in support for Union accession. The correlation is rather weak yet highly significant. It is also evident that the correlation remains stable throughout the time-frame under study and is consolidated during the period leading to 2007.

Swiss Federal Councils' discourse on neutrality and EU membership

The second phase of this study consists of a content-oriented discourse analysis chosen on the merits of its potential to analyse social phenomena that are of a both qualitative and interpretive nature. The method explores how reality is produced, underlining the fact that social reality is actively created through meaningful interaction (Hardy et al. 2004). Discourse helps understand the relations of power and the logic of social and political organisations which are not a natural but socially constructed. The aim of the study being undertaken is to assess whether the government takes the citizens' opinion into account when debating and establishing its official opinion with regard to EU membership. The discourse analysis model being applied focuses on statements in official publications issued by the Swiss government. A common feature of all publications is that they contain statements concerning neutrality and relations

with the EU. These relations are either of a security, economic or political nature. In terms of the variety of discourse which will form part of the research, I am exclusively opting for the discourse of the Swiss federal government. This lies mainly in the fact that the Federal Council is able to conduct a relatively strong government policy with relative independence from parties and factions in the parliament. This makes the government an important policy maker and enables it to shape a particular discourse. Equally, the government also represents the opinion of the four biggest parties of the parliament. This is due to a set of unwritten rules called the *Zauberformel*, the “magic formula”, which forms part of the Swiss concordance system. It is an arithmetic formula through which the seven executive seats of the Swiss Federal Council are proportionally divided among the four ruling parties. Its purpose is to designate an executive that represents the main political parties, linguistic communities and regions (Schwok 2009: 106). Another important aspect of consensus democracy in Switzerland is the unwritten *Kollegialitätsprinzip*, the “principle of collegiality”. All members of the Federal Council defend decisions once they are taken collectively. This means that the government must reach a compromise, even though it is composed of opposing parties. The magic formula and the principle of collegiality ensure that the discourse in the official reports included in this study represent the government’s opinion, regardless of the composition of the parliament. Table 2 presents the reports being analysed as part of the study.

Table 2: Overview over the Official Government Reports Analysed in the Study

<i>Foreign Policy Reports</i>	<i>Security Reports</i>	<i>Neutrality Reports</i>	<i>Integration Reports</i>	<i>Europe Report</i>
2000	2000	2000	1999	2006
2007	2010	2007 ¹		
2009				
2010				
2011				
2012				

¹ Included in the Foreign Security Report 2007

Different viewpoints and political tension between the government and the electorate

In February 1999, the government published an Integration Report with the intention of providing a reasoned, objective and readily understandable basis for the debate about [EU] integration (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1999:1). One reason was the “high demand for information” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1999:2) among Swiss citizens as its main reason for the publication date. The Council emphasised that it would not seek to set out arguments in favour of Swiss EU accession, nor were it delineating an integration action plan. The Integration Report stressed once again that EU membership is legally compatible with the status of permanent armed neutrality. The telling difference from earlier reports lay in the view being espoused on the matter of neutrality. The Swiss government stated in the Integration Report that if a European security architecture were to be created, offering Swiss citizens the same level of security as armed neutrality, it could renounce neutrality in favour of such a security system. “Neutrality might become meaningless” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1999: 381). This statement differs from the stand-point taken six years earlier whereby the government said it would *rethink* neutrality. The stance of the government between 1993 and 1999 that it wants to negotiate the multilateral integration between Switzerland and the EU, had not fundamentally changed. Switzerland’s attempts to strengthen its ties with the EU were further underlined by the government’s opinion that “Swiss accession to the EU would promote national cohesion” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 1999:399) and the country’s influence in Europe, while the representation of state interests being significantly improved.

In the Security Policy Report 2000 and in the Neutrality Report 2000, the government once-again outlined that neutrality had lost its meaning and Switzerland needed to cooperate with the international community. The government saw the bilateral agreements as an appropriate measure yet EU membership was still the government’s long-term goal. The government considered these bilateral agreements as balanced and positive and also a means to partially offset the negative consequences brought about by the refusal of EEA membership in 1992 (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000a: 269, 2000c). The government was also convinced that the electorate approved the foreign policy conducted within the last decade and that the Federal Council’s “efforts helped in meeting the foreign policy interests and the demands and wishes of the citizens” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000a: 356). However, the Federal Council emphasised that Swiss foreign policy needs to take the form of more than just the sum of bilateral relations. Crucial issues could only be solved at an international level, with the adoption of a multilateral policy having become the prevailing political and economic course

of action (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000a: 297). This also meant that the two traditional pillars of Swiss security policy, namely autonomous defence and neutrality, decreased in importance in favour of cooperation with others. Therefore, “security through cooperation” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000b: 10) formed the new leitmotif of the new Swiss security policy. These statements bear special significance as the government repeatedly noted in its report that Swiss citizens might openly call into question its strategy. The Swiss public’s position was being described as a “majority which is opposed against the opening of the country” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000a: 327), and that “ultimately, the Swiss citizens [...] decide on all foreign policy issues” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2000a: 295). In 2006, the Federal Council published its Report about Europe in which it “submits an analysis of the consequences of a possible accession of Switzerland to the EU” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2006: 6825). The document outlined further steps and procedures for safeguarding Swiss interests toward the EU. The purpose was to examine the various policy instruments available to Switzerland in its relations with the EU rather than focusing on institutional affiliation. Public opinion on the matter was not mentioned in the report. However, it was again underlined that European policy was of concern to all because “the state system is based on the expensive participation of people and cantons” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2006: 6983).

In 2007, the Federal Council published another Swiss Foreign Policy Report including a Report on Neutrality. Globalisation was the central theme of the report, coupled with suggestions on how Switzerland can maintain its bilateral and multilateral relations in such an environment of international interdependence. In this document, the Federal Council concluded “that the continuation of bilateral cooperation with the EU is right now the best way to safeguard the nation’s interests” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2007: 5539). Despite the request to strengthen relations with the EU in areas of common interests, EU membership was not mentioned at all in this Swiss Foreign Policy Report (2007). Yet the government did emphasize that it wanted to analyse the rapidly changing developments in the EU. “If it turns out that bilateral cooperation is no longer the best tool for the defence of Swiss interests, one would have to choose a different instrument” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2007 : 5539).

In the Foreign Policy Report 2009, the Federal Council stated that the EU is generally the most important partner for Switzerland. The EU is seen as growing in its strength and importance at a time when the European continent is losing its global influence. One of the objectives of the European policy of the Federal Council was the development and consolidation of new bilateral agreements. The bilateral path which Switzerland and the EU embarked upon has proven its worth and resulted in a dense network of international agreements

furthering shared interests. However, there was no guarantee that the bilateral approach would remain feasible in the long term. Switzerland wanted to take care of its relations with the EU while maintaining its influence during the development of bilateral contracts. This included the further development of its own national regulations. It was important that the “bilateral approach should not lead to a de facto membership without voting rights” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2009: 27). The government also explicitly mentioned that foreign policy decisions needed to be supported domestically, which required “an ongoing dialogue with [...] the cantons and the public” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2009: 226). This shows that the government wanted the citizens to be involved in the problem-solving process. However, the statements made in the report are ambiguous. On one hand, the Federal Council had underscored the importance of the bilateral agreements. On the other hand, it had not excluded EU membership as a possible option.

The following Swiss Foreign Policy and Security Report were published in 2010, a year after the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force on 1 December, 2009. The possibility of EU membership was not mentioned in the 2010 reports, with the bilateral system deemed for being more flexible. In areas with no contractual relation, it allowed Switzerland “room for maneuver and to conduct autonomous solutions which possibly differ from EU law” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2010a: 1038). The Foreign Policy Report also acknowledged that that it was “no surprise that sovereignty and dependency [...] of Switzerland are increasingly and controversially debated among Swiss citizens” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2010a: 1237). The topics mentioned in the 2010 report were repeated in the Swiss Foreign Policy Reports 2011 and 2012. The Federal Council stated that the EU “further expanded its capacity in areas of foreign policy, security and defence” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2011: 2899). It was also mentioned that the EU increasingly urges all countries with access to the internal market to adopt all relevant rules. This includes not only “the acquisition of the current EU law for any contract, but also the systematic adjustment of further contracts to the latest developments of EU law” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2012: 998). Mediation between foreign and domestic political developments had become increasingly complex. This was not only restricted to EU policy but was particularly illustrated through the example of the initiative against the construction of minarets approved on 29 November, 2009 by 57.5% of the participating voters. The minaret initiative has continued to present a challenge to Swiss foreign policy. “Switzerland’s reputation, as well as its legitimacy as an actor for peace and the promotion of human rights, has suffered” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2010a:1149). The Council wanted to continue with the bilateral agreements but was also faced with increasing impatience on the part

of the EU. As EU representatives pointed out: “The bilateral way is stretched to its limits and new institutional solutions have to be found” (Schweizerischer Bundesrat 2011: 2928). Moreover, some of the negotiations for bilateral contracts had stalled or even blocked due to institutional questions. The Federal Council now faced several difficulties along with having to cope with increased demands from the EU. Furthermore, it simply was not possible to influence the integration process within the EU and to predict how this would bear on the Union’s policies toward Switzerland. The difficulties in the relation with the EU were further underlined when European Union officials expressed doubts about the Swiss decision to tighten measures against increasing immigration from the European Union in 2012. Domestically, the government did not see EU membership as an option. Neither the 2011 nor the 2012 reports mention accession negotiations with the EU. And no mention of the citizen’s current position on the governments’ neutrality policy or its policy toward the EU was made.

Conclusion

I have examined how the perception of neutrality influences the Swiss citizens’ support for EU accession. In the second step, I analysed whether or not the government took the electorate’s opinion into account when it outlined its position on neutrality and concordant policy formulation toward the EU, given the threat of referendum. I was able to demonstrate that neutrality remains a very important institution of Switzerland’s foreign policy. The importance of Swiss neutrality for its citizens is far from transient, and actually continues to increase over time. Neutrality is not seen as an outdated concept and neither the government’s assertion that neutrality lost its meaning in a globalised and interdependent environment nor that EU membership would have a negative effect on neutrality changed the citizens’ opinion. “Neutrality continues to enjoy popular support across the language divide” (Theiler 2004: 638).

Given the growing influence of the EU and its ongoing integration process, I expected Swiss citizens to fiercely oppose EU membership, given the perceived threats to the economy and/or cultural identity. Yet the results seem to be less clear. While there is a general tendency of rejection of EU membership by 2011, it has to be noticed that over the given time period, various shifts in the opinion of the interviewed citizens occurred. The Swiss voting outcomes of foreign and security policy in recent years further underline this result. Most referendums on foreign policy, including the bilateral agreements, have been accepted by the electorate. However, as the results show, it is likely that the more Swiss citizens are attached to neutrality, the more important national identity is for them. Moreover, it seems plausible that the higher

the importance of neutrality among Swiss citizens, the lower the overall support for EU membership is. The trend does not change over the analysed time period. As these results indicate, being Swiss means having strong allegiances to Switzerland's political institutions and civic practices. This defines them as a community and ensures the nation's internal cohesion. The Swiss see themselves as a *Sonderfall* and react sensitively to the perception of threats to national interests and fundamental Swiss institutions. If joining the EU means a threat to these institutions or acquiring allegiances to EU institutions and practices, a potential for discord arises.

Looking at the official reports published by the Swiss government, the ambiguous position of the government becomes apparent. The character and the tone of the statements in the published reports indicate that the government was faced with various contradicting tasks. While it recognised the citizens' right to a say, it also had to take into account the international political and economic environment. Neutrality was always seen as a flexible means of safeguarding national interests. By mainly ignoring the strong cultural and historic meaning of neutrality for Swiss citizens and focusing on its legal significance, the government seemed to show a lack of sensitivity. The importance of neutrality as a symbol of sovereignty, identity and independence was underestimated by the Federal Council. This realistic and pragmatic direction with which the government assessed neutrality as an adjustable means of security policy possibly widened the gap between the government's and the citizens' view on EU accession. It is surprising that the institutionalised veto mechanisms of direct democracy and rising nationalism within recent years have not led to a more inclusive approach by the government. This delicate relationship between the government and the citizens was also made evident by the accepted referendum against mass immigration on the 9. February 2014. It clearly showed, more than two decades after the EEA vote in 1992, what could happen if Swiss citizens feel misrepresented. This result not only calls into question bilateral accords with the EU by overturning the free movement policy introduced in the EU, but also expresses the conflict of opening Switzerland toward the EU and the citizens' will to defend traditions. From the results of this analysis, a fundamental lesson has to be learned by the government. In order to bridge the gap that separates the Federal Council from the electorate regarding issues of neutrality and EU integration, the political elite must find a way to connect its goals with the concerns of Swiss citizens. Within its discourse, the government must find a way to demonstrate that Swiss identity is compatible with an opening toward Europe.

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Annex

<i>Label</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Response Categories/Coding</i>
National identity		
Attachment to Switzerland	People tend to feel attached in varying degrees to their commune, canton, linguistic region, country or to Europe. Can you tell me how strongly you feel attached to . . . your country	1 [very attached]; 2 [fairly attached]; 3 [not very attached]; 4 [not attached at all]
Neutrality		
Importance of Neutrality	Switzerland is characterised by particular political institutions We are interested in three of them. The first is neutrality (the non-interference in conflicts abroad. [...] How important are – in your view - these three political institutions for the future of our country ? What about the neutrality.	1 [very important]; 2 [quite important]; 3 [not very important]; 4 [not at all important]
EU membership		
Support for EU membership	If a vote on EU membership took place next Sunday, how would you vote?	1 [certainly in favour]; 2 [rather in favour]; 3 [rather against]; 4 [certainly against]

