

Muting Science: Input Overload Versus Scientific Advice in Swiss Policy Making During the Covid-19 Pandemic

KLAUS ARMINGEON AND FRITZ SAGER

Abstract

This article explores why the Swiss Federal Council and the Swiss Federal Parliament were reluctant to follow the majority views of the scientific epidemiological community at the beginning of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. We propose an institutionalist take on this question and argue that one major explanation could be the input overload that is characteristic of the Swiss federal political system. We define input overload as the simultaneous inputs of corporatist, pluralist, federalist and direct democratic subsystems. Adding another major input—this time from the scientific subsystem—may have threatened to further erode the government's and parliament's discretionary power to cope with the pandemic. We assume that the federal government reduced its input overload by fending off scientific advice.

Keywords: science-policy interface, scientific policy advice, Covid-19, Switzerland, institutionalism

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE explores why the Swiss government was reluctant to follow the advice provided by the specifically established science task force during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. While Switzerland coped relatively well with the first wave in the spring of 2020, its performance—measured as excess deaths or infections and standardised by population size—during the second wave in the autumn of 2020 was among the worst when compared to neighbouring countries. This poor performance may be causally connected to the federal government's relatively weak and delayed reaction to the rise of infections in September and October 2020, as expressed by international indicators on the stringency of policy measures. The government's relationship to the scientific community during the second wave of the pandemic is of interest because the government had established the Covid-19 science taskforce during the first wave and, initially, the relationship between the two was largely constructive.¹

At the beginning of this second wave, however, it became obvious that there was a conflict between scientific policy advice and government. This had begun prior to autumn 2020 and has continued ever since. While most scientists recommended stricter and timelier measures, federal and cantonal governments have been much more reluctant to implement such measures. Political actors signalled that scientific advice would receive the same weight as inputs by economic and societal interests groups, therefore equating the logic of science with the logic of politics, that is, the institutionalised processing of conflictual interests based on the power distribution between economic and social groups.

The science taskforce, being the institutionalised core of scientific advice during the pandemic, also included public interest-oriented economists from Swiss universities. Members of the task force avoided any open disagreement in the public. Rather, '[f]rom the beginning, policy briefs were developed in an

¹F. Sager and C. Mavrot, 'Switzerland's Covid-19 policy response: consociational crisis management and neo-corporatist reopening', *European Policy*

Analysis, vol. 6, no. 2, 2020, pp. 293–304; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/epa2.1094> (accessed 21 May 2022).

iterative process open to all expert groups, which included economic, social, ethical, and legal perspectives.² Hence, the advice by life scientists had already been weighted by arguments from economics and other academic disciplines before the scientific taskforce presented its findings and comments on policy options.

Furthermore, in February 2021, a commission within the federal parliament recommended that members of the scientific federal committee, that is, the Covid-19 science taskforce, not be allowed to issue public statements alone, requiring instead that their statements be approved by the national government. While this proposal failed to obtain a majority in the parliament, it reflected a general mistrust of the scientific discourse and propagated the idea that scientific knowledge is only one of many other inputs into the political process and does not have special status.

However, the scientific community itself acted without much empathy for the functional requirements of democratic politics in this special situation, expressing little concern over the effects that their scientific communication would have on a non-scientific public, and some scientists presented their arguments and ideas in a very personalised and uncompromising way. While scientists complained that politics must learn to meet the scientific system on a level playing field, politicians and interest representatives were angry with scientists for failing to integrate systematically the state of scientific research and its uncertainties into policy making processes. The federal chancellor—a top-level bureaucrat who organises the federal government—described in an interview the relationship between science and politics:

[It] has been too little clarified for quite some time, and in some cases strained ... The two worlds are very different, and contacts between politicians and scientists are rare. In the pandemic, there were suddenly media conferences with scientists that the politicians did not even know existed. With scientists who did not all show the same modesty when it came to their model calculations ... [I]nstitutional exchange

[between science and politics] has functioned too little so far. From a political point of view, science is located at the outermost orbit of the administration, with the extra-parliamentary commissions. Often, politicians had only two motives for resorting to them: when it was a matter of voicing unpleasant truths and thus justifying a reform. Or to confirm what politicians thought was good anyway. That science could contradict politics, on the other hand, was rather less envisaged.³

Scientific advice to policy makers is the consolidated recommendation of an established expert community in their respective field of scientific specialisation. Why did Swiss politics have so much trouble using scientific advice during a major national crisis? It is particularly astonishing given that Switzerland is one of the resource-richest countries in the world with a leading scientific system. Switzerland does not differ much from other countries which demonstrated a delayed response to the second wave owing to a more contested policy environment. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how Swiss institutions made this contestation particularly costly. Consequently, we propose an approach that identifies the institutional factors that strengthen or weaken the role of science in policy making.

Building on previous work, we argue that the friction between science and politics was owing to an input overload from the political system.⁴ Given the large amount of institutionalised access opportunities to politics granted by the Swiss political system, politicians would lose a considerable amount of their already constrained decision-making capabilities by granting a prominent access point for science. Boswell, et al. coined the term ‘court politics’ to refer to ‘the political leadership network of politicians, public servants, and political

³Interview with Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr, *Thuner Tagblatt*, 19 July 2021.

⁴F. Sager and C. Rissi, ‘The limited scope of policy appraisal in the context of referendum democracy—the case of regulatory impact assessment in Switzerland’, *Evaluation*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 151–163; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356389011401612> (accessed 21 May 2022).

²Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, *The Role of Science in the Swiss Policy Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Bern, Swiss Academies Reports, vol. 16, no. 11, 2021, pp. 38–39.

advisers at the heart of government'.⁵ In a nutshell, as we will argue, the federal government was only able to retain some political leeway if it could control and limit the influence of the scientific community as a hitherto peripheral actor in politics. The peripheral status of the scientific subsystem is also a consequence of how the government had avoided institutionalised scientific advice in non-crisis times. While other countries either rely on scientific councils that provide expertise in a timely manner (Germany) or have incorporated scientific advice into their administrations (France), Switzerland has an arms-length relationship toward the scientific subsystem and follows a case-wise mobilisation of scientific insights via commissioned research that provides evidence generated through systematic and scientific procedures. While a comparative approach would arguably reveal more general findings about the science-policy interface, our argument aims to explain the specific case of Swiss domestic policy.⁶ Our analysis rests on the claim that scientific knowledge should not only be taken alongside the many other inputs into the policy process;⁷ rather, it should have special status—especially in the case of the Covid crisis, when specific expert knowledge was crucial.

The following list provides evidence, compiled by the authors for a Bertelsmann Foundation report,⁸ of the many access opportunities granted to non-scientific

actors and interests that constrained the Swiss government's leeway in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic:

- The silent, but efficient channel of social partnerships that activated efficient crisis-limiting social and labour market policies (corporatism I).
- The efficient and informal channel of cooperation between the federal ministries—in particular the Federal Department of Finance—and banks for developing a policy for short-term credits to firms suffering from the crisis (corporatism II).
- The well-developed pluralist interest intermediation by business associations—especially retail, restaurants, and the hotel industry—bolstered by strong personal ties with public officials and politicians in a small political system where all major powerful actors were very likely to have known each other prior to the crisis (pluralism).
- A federal system that grants member states, that is, cantons, much power and discretion, even in light of the federal government's activation of a so-called 'extraordinary situation' that shifts formal powers to the federal government (federalism).
- A system of direct democracy with popular votes where citizens may, relatively easily, revoke existing legislation or even establish new constitutional norms (direct democracy).

⁵J. Boswell, et al., 'The comparative "court politics" of Covid-19: explaining government responses to the pandemic', *Journal of European Public Policy* vol. 28, 2021, pp. 1258–1277; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942159> (accessed 21 May 2022).

⁶S. Hadorn, F. Sager, C. Mavrot, A. Malandrino, J. Ege, 'Evidence-based policy making in times of acute crisis: comparing the use of scientific knowledge in Germany, Switzerland and France', *Politische Vierteljahresschrift/German Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 63, 2022, pp. 359–382; <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-022-00382-x> (accessed 21 May 2022).

⁷Joshua Newman, 'Debating the Politics of Evidence-Based Policy', *Public Administration* 95(4) (2017), 1107–12; Fritz Sager, et al., "Utilization-focused scientific policy advice: a six-point checklist," *Climate Policy* 20 no.10 (2020): 1336–1343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2020.1757399>.

⁸See C. Schiller, et al., *Just how Resilient are OECD and EU Countries? Sustainable Governance in the Context of the Covid-19 Crisis*, Gütersloh, Bertelsmann Stiftung,

The power granted citizens by direct democracy is especially relevant for dictating appropriate policy output. A potential policy based on scientific arguments and data requires citizens to have a very high level of knowledge of and the ability to evaluate scientific evidence, or a system that works effectively based on cue-giving by knowledgeable political parties. These two pre-conditions are often not in place and decisions at the ballot box may thus be driven by deep-seated values and 'folk epidemiology'.

The disconnect between the knowledge citizens need to make informed decisions and the knowledge they possess is telling beyond the Swiss case: these general challenges facing

2021; <https://doi.org/10.11586/2021123> (accessed 21 May 2022).

the interaction between science and politics are not unique to the Swiss political system. However, institutionalised access opportunities are particularly extensive in Switzerland owing to the simultaneous influence of social and liberal corporatism, pluralistic group pressure politics and unique subsystems of strong federalism and direct democracy. We assume that these informal or institutionalised access opportunities motivated politicians to control and limit inputs from science to preserve their capacity to act.

Social partnership: the strength of silent cooperation (corporatism I)

Corporatism denotes the voluntary cooperation of major interest groups and the state for designing and implementing coordinated public and private policies. Peter Katzenstein distinguished between social and liberal corporatism. In social corporatism, trade unions and the state play a major role (for example, in Austria). In contrast, in liberal corporatism—where Switzerland is a prime example—employers' interest organisations and trade unions organise social partnerships which work together to engage in bargaining over policy with the state. While trade unions act as junior partners in liberal corporatism, they nevertheless have an excellent economic and political power position.⁹ There is strong evidence of the viability of Swiss corporatism, although it has recently been weakened by globalisation and domestic developments (including the decline of class organisations and the rise of citizens' groups).¹⁰

⁹P. J. Katzenstein, 'Small states and small states revisited', *New Political Economy*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1982, pp. 9–30.

¹⁰K. Armingeon, 'Swiss corporatism in comparative perspective', *West European Politics*, vol. 20, 1997, pp. 164–179; K. Armingeon, 'A prematurely announced death? Swiss corporatism in comparative perspective', in C. Trampusch and A. Mach, eds., *Switzerland in Europe: Continuity and Change in the Swiss Political Economy*, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 165–185; A. Mach, et al., 'From quiet to noisy politics: transformations of Swiss business elites' power', *Politics and Society*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2021, pp. 17–41; <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0032329220985693> (accessed 25 May 2022).

Corporatism is based on the structural power of large interest organisations that rely on the role of trade unions and indirect cooperation with government and which, in Switzerland, have the power to trigger a popular vote on policies approved by parliament. It is thus important for policy makers to work with interest groups when developing policy to avoid the potential risk of a popular vote repeal of their carefully designed policies.¹¹ In addition, social partnership, understood as efficient negotiations between employers and workers without much disruption by industrial action and relatively harmonious relations between employers and employees, is considered to be a competitive advantage of the export-led Swiss economic growth model.

During the pandemic, trade unions and employers also worked together to design pragmatic and timely policies and to implement rules for short-term work, continued payment of wages, improvement of conditions for low-wage workers, as well as income continuation for the self-employed. These policies required collaboration between labour market organisations and the ministers of finance and economy and social policy, thereby side-lining designated federal organisations such as the State Secretariat for the Economy, an agency in the Federal Department of Economy. Personal contacts have played an important role in bridging party politics. Our interview with a leader of the trade unions revealed that Doris Bianchi (formerly a leading trade union officer and a collaborator for the social democratic minister for social affairs since 2018), Serge Gaillard (also a former leading social-democratic trade union officer and recently retired as a top administrator for the Federal Ministry of Finance, led by a member of the major right-wing party SVP), and Martin Baltisser (a former member of the SVP party leadership and now a close collaborator of the SVP federal minister of the economy) hammered out the legislative and regulative changes for short-term work together with trade unions and employers. This social corporatism has occurred relatively silently, with little attention from the mass media, despite its apparent enormous efficiency for ensuring the continuation of

¹¹A. Vatter, *Das politische System der Schweiz*, 3rd edn., Baden-Baden, Nomos (UTB), 2018, p. 376.

wage payments and therefore a stable consumer economy.

Banks and the Federal Department of Finance: liberal corporatism based on trust and familiarity (corporatism II)

While Swiss corporatism in labour market policy making—and short-term work and wage continuation in particular—is based on a strong trade union influence, other fields of economic policy making have historically been dominated by employers' organisations (the 'Vorort', later renamed 'economie.suisse' as the political arm, and the 'business association' as the counterpart to labour unions).¹² Because of their structural economic power, the weakness of the fragmented labour movement, and the close formal and informal links between employers and the country's political elite, employers in many policy fields have sat in the driver's seat of policy design. The federal government and its administration have, on the other hand, been relieved from many tasks that they were unable to perform owing to a scarcity of personnel resources and policy expertise and their close personal and ideological ties between a predominantly centre-right government and employers.

This liberal corporatism played an important role during the pandemic, as clearly demonstrated by its development of one of the major programmes for coping with the economic fall-out. Liberal corporatism entitled the firms that were in need to request credits from their bank without much additional analysis of their financial standing and with a federal government guarantee of any corresponding loan defaults. This programme was designed within a few days of the issuing of the state of emergency by representatives of five major banks, together with the Federal Department of Finance, thus reflecting significant mutual trust, familiarity and a very pragmatic heterodox economic ideology.

¹²P. Eichenberger and A. Mach, 'Swiss business interest associations between socio-economic regulation and political influence', in Trampusch and Mach, eds., *Switzerland in Europe*, pp. 63–81.

Pressure politics: effectively pressuring for their own interests (pluralism)

Swiss corporatism is in danger of being supplanted by pluralistic pressure group politics, that is, the unilateral pursuit of politics by interest groups who demand public policies without proposing their own private policies.¹³ These groups thereby constrain the scope for feasible policies and fail to collaborate in the implementation of a concerted package of public and private policies.

The major showcase for pluralistic interest groups during the pandemic has arguably been the restaurant and hotel owner interest group, GastroSuisse. It obtained an early exit for its member firms from the lockdown during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁴ In the second wave, interest organisations such as GastroSuisse lobbied forcefully—frequently with cantonal administrations—to avoid further restrictions on restaurants and hotels. GastroSuisse succeeded in obtaining broad media coverage and its leader, Casimir Platzer, strategically used all available options to gain influence:

[He] has mastered the game with the media. There is hardly a newspaper where Platzer was not in and exerting pressure ... Platzer is one of those who know exactly where to intervene in the machine room of Bernese politics if they want to achieve something. He is very well networked. GastroSuisse even keeps its own paid lobby group among the parliamentarians. The fact that he is on a first-name basis with almost all federal councillors is mentioned in most portraits of him.¹⁵

¹³A. Mach, 'Transformations of Swiss neo-corporatism', in R. Careja, et al., eds., *The European Social Model under Pressure*, Springer, online, 2019, pp. 51–68; S. Eichenberger, 'The rise of citizen groups within the administration and parliament in Switzerland', *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2020, pp. 206–227; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/spsr.12394> (accessed 25 May 2022).

¹⁴F. Sager and C. Mavrot, 'Switzerland's Covid-19 policy response: consociational crisis management and neo-corporatist reopening'.

¹⁵'Gastrosuisse zu den neuen Massnahmen: "Heutiger Entscheid ist ein wichtiger Schritt"', *Grenchner Tagblatt*, 13 January 2021; see also *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ), 23 November 2020.

Cantons: developing cantonal policies and intervening in federal politics (federalism)

The Swiss confederation and federal system lack sovereignty. Federal institutions can only undertake activities explicitly set out in the constitution and any constitutional change requires a popular vote, with the approval of a majority of the population and the cantons. The twenty-six cantons have sovereignty over their own territories, except when restricted by the constitution. As a result, the cantons are responsible for various policy fields, including tax and healthcare. The Swiss federal system shares characteristics with US and German federal systems. Swiss cantons have discretionary powers that are comparable to those of states in the US. However, the cantons and federal agencies are 'interlocked', because federal agencies depend on cantonal administrations for policy implementation and cantons depend on transfers from the federal state. This is also the case in the German federalist system. However, because cantonal and federal political decision making is only loosely connected, the Swiss system does not suffer from the joint decision trap that is typical in the German system. Cantons and the federal government do not have to negotiate over policies because of the largely clear separation of tasks. This is especially true following the most recent federalism reforms in 2008. Moreover, there is mostly only an informal 'interlocking' of federal and cantonal politics, and there is no co-decision requirement on policies. In contrast, the German system follows a unitarian or cooperative federalism.¹⁶ Cantonal veto power occurs as part of policy implementation rather than policy making, and cantonal discretion can play out through policy implementation and the degree to which it complies with a policy.¹⁷

The pandemic has profoundly changed the efficiency-increasing relationship that is characteristic of Swiss federalism. The Swiss Federal Council law on epidemics (SR 818.101, Articles 6 and 7) defines two major exceptional situations: an 'extraordinary situation' and a 'special situation'. In an 'extraordinary situation', the federal government may unilaterally pursue appropriate measures to fight a pandemic. Accordingly, all power in pandemic policies is transferred from the cantonal to the federal level. In a 'special situation', the federal government is responsible for fighting the pandemic, but it may only act after consulting with the cantons. Cantons must 'take additional measures if the number of cases on their territory is increasing, there is a threat of an increase in the number of cases, or other indicators point to a problematic development (e.g., reproduction value, capacities in contact tracing and health care). Measures may therefore differ from canton to canton'.¹⁸

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 'extraordinary situation' lasted from March 2020 to June 2020. From June 2020 to April 2022, the Swiss government has acted under the rules of the 'special situation'. This means that the federal government cannot act on its own, but needs to consult the cantons before changing any policy. Meanwhile, cantons have to accept the minimum regulations set out by the federal government—and may still reluctantly implement federal rules. Moreover, they may also introduce more stringent policies. The canton–federal government relationship under the special situation approaches unitary federalism's strategic pursuit of interlocking policies. In fact, all the federal government's measures during the pandemic have been taken in agreement with the majority of cantons. At times, this has caused the federal govern-

¹⁶Vatter, *Das politische System der Schweiz*, ch. 10; W. Linder, *Schweizerische Demokratie—Institutionen, Prozesse, Perspektiven*, Bern, Haupt, 1999, pp. 135–189.

¹⁷F. Sager, 'Kompensationsmöglichkeiten föderaler Vollzugsdefizite. Das Beispiel der kantonalen Alkoholpräventionspolitiken', *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, pp. 309–333; F. Sager, et al., *Policy-Analyse in der Schweiz. Besonderheiten, Theorien, Beispiele*, Zurich, NZZ Libro, 2017; F. Sager,

C. Rüefli and E. Thomann, 'Fixing Federal Faults. Complementary Member State Policies in Swiss Health Care Policy', *International Review of Public Policy*, 1:2 | 2019, 147–172. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/irpp.426>.

¹⁸Swiss Federal Council, 'Ordinance on measures during the special situation to combat the Covid-19 epidemic', June 2020; <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2020/439/en> (accessed 25 May 2022).

ment to become irritated by cantonal decisions.¹⁹ Cantonal political elites have sometimes pursued their own policies that focus on the economic and social interests of their canton and electoral constituencies.²⁰ In sum, the federal government's dependence on negotiations and agreement with the cantons has turned loose coupling into 'tight coupling', with all its efficiency-reducing implications. For the federal government, this has meant its policy discretion has been constrained by more than just corporatist sub-systems, which were functionally necessary for the system to operate. The range of feasible options have also been limited by pressure politics. Moreover, the federal government *de facto* lost its decision-making power on policies owing to tight coupling with the cantons under the 'special situation' regime.

Citizens' rule: citizens deciding on epidemiological questions and parties that fail to provide reasonable cues (direct democracy)

Unlike representative democracies, direct democracies such as the Swiss system must deal with direct political participation through popular votes, or at least the threat of popular votes. Based on the broad literature on Swiss direct democracy, we point to three interrelated aspects in the context of the pandemic: citizens' knowledge of epidemiological questions, partisan cues to voters and processes of 'hot cognition'.²¹

¹⁹M. Hinterleitner, C. Honegger and F. Sager, 'Blame avoidance in hard times: complex governance structures and the COVID-19 pandemic', *West European Politics*, 2022; DOI: [10.1080/01402382.2022.2064634](https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2022.2064634) (accessed 25 May 2022).

²⁰R. Freiburghaus, S. Mueller and A. Vatter, 'Switzerland: overnight centralization in one of the world's most federal countries', in R. Chattopadhyay, F. Knüpling, D. Chebenova, L. Whittington and P. Gonzalez, eds., *Federalism and the Response to Covid-19. A Comparative Analysis*, London/New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 217–228.

²¹See H. Kriesi, *Direct Democratic Choice*, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2005; W. Linder, *Direct Democracy*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 101–120.

Controversies over appropriate policies for coping with the pandemic led to two federal popular votes. In the first vote, citizens wanted to repeal the major Covid-19 law that dealt with many economic, social, and health issues. Although this popular vote failed in June 2021, it presented a major challenge to the federal government's official strategy. In July 2021, about 200,000 signatures were submitted to open a second popular vote on this bill (50,000 signatures are required to hold a popular vote). The government was prepared for this and several other requests for a popular vote on related matters. Accordingly, federal pandemic policies have been issued in a way that seeks to ensure that they will be able to survive popular votes, though the administration cannot assume that all votes will be in favour of the government's policy.

The government's ability to calculate the risk associated with a policy would improve if it could assume that citizens possess sufficient knowledge of the proposed policies, policy controversies and the major scientific debates underlying pandemic policies. Alternatively, if political parties had sufficient information and knowledge about policy controversies, they would be able to develop reasonable voting recommendations for their constituents. However, it is unclear whether citizens or parties possessed adequate knowledge of the proposed policies and the corresponding debates behind them. Covid-19 has been a highly salient issue, and a considerable number of citizens developed their own stance on pandemic-related policy. There were also many hobby epidemiologists. Based on insights from former popular votes, it is far from clear whether these citizens really based their policy opinions on sound (scientific) knowledge. However, following partisan cues was not really possible during the crisis. On the one hand, political parties were not at the forefront of developing policy alternatives—the parliament even adjourned its session during a critical phase. On the other hand, the crucial precondition for partisan cues to be effective, which is a voter's attachment to a particular party, is in decline in Switzerland, as in many other countries, and hence has a limited effect.

The government's ability to propose acceptable policy to its citizenry is even more complicated if we consider recent research on

individual decision processes.²² It has been suggested that many popular votes are based on ‘hot cognition’, where prior attitudes and values are decisive for position-taking. Afterwards, ‘motivated reasoning’ takes place, including biasing judgements in favour of automatically activated, affectively congruent beliefs.²³ This reasoning may properly represent citizens’ preferences if the policy controversy concerns values. However, it is unreliable for preference formation if epidemiological questions are at the core of a policy.

Conclusion

This paper begins by asking why the Swiss Federal Council and the Swiss Federal Parliament were reluctant to follow the majority views of the scientific epidemiological community at the beginning of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. We argued that one major explanation is the input overload of the Swiss Federal political system. By input overload, we mean the simultaneous inputs received by corporatist, pluralist, federalist and direct-democratic subsystems. Another major input—this time from the scientific subsystem—may have been perceived by the government and parliament as a further erosion of their discretionary power for coping with the pandemic.

We hasten to add that we only flesh out the access opportunities to the political system and how they constrain governmental and parliamentary action. We are not providing causal evidence that the federal political elite insulated itself from scientific advice because it did not want to enter into a reactive position. However, this input overload could have arguably been a major factor driving the government’s actions. It is worth mentioning that while other countries also possess many input channels, the cumulation of institutionalised input opportunities is unique to the Swiss political system.

We do not claim that our argument is the only argument that explains the reluctance of

the government to accept scientific advice. We also believe that the following factors may ‘explain the government’s decision to ignore scientific advice:

- Scientists face many challenges when they hold a prominent position and their advice is urgently needed. They have to decide on their strategy for approaching politics.²⁴ In addition, the logic of science—stating uncertainty and competing for the better argument—is difficult for a broader public to understand, and (Swiss) scientists are hardly trained to communicate their views and procedures to a non-scientific audience.
- Not all (Swiss) scientists are free from vanity, narcissism, and egocentric habits. These habits may complicate the communication between political and scientific systems.
- Switzerland has a relatively minimal institutionalised input of expertise. Instead, politicians and scientists are accustomed to a communication pattern that is based on the externalised production of scientific evidence. In contrast, countries such as Germany have institutionalised expertise (scientific councils) in place when a question arises and other countries have an administration that has sufficient internal scientific expertise (France).
- Politicians may possess noble motives for ignoring scientific advice. If politicians delegate their decision power to scientists, they blur the accountability for their decisions.
- A comparative study by Forster, et al. found that governments are more willing to accept scientific advice if government members also have broad scientific training.²⁵ They operationalise this scientific training by measuring whether a member of government has a PhD. Applying this finding to the context of the Swiss Federal

²⁴R. A. Pielke, Jr., *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Z. Pamuk, ‘Covid-19 and the paradox of scientific advice’, *Perspectives on Politics*, 2021, pp. 1–15.

²⁵T. Forster and M. Heinzl, ‘Reacting, fast and slow: how world leaders shaped government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 28, 2021, pp. 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2021.1942157> (accessed 25 May 2022).

government—where only two of seven members currently hold a PhD—could explain the government’s relative distance to the scientific subsystem.

- Boswell, et al.’s introduction of the notion of ‘courts’, that is, the internal structure of the top layer of the political system, may also explain this distance.²⁶ From their perspective, the Swiss ‘court’ is decentralised, heterogeneous and weakly integrated, which could explain why it (in contrast to, for example, the centralised Danish government) was unable or unwilling to integrate scientific advice.

While we see the advantages of these additional explanations, we emphasise that they are complementary with our notion of ‘input overload’. While, we only have limited textual evidence and little clear direct evidence for our suggested causal pathway, we hope to have convinced readers that the many existing institutionalised input channels endanger the capacity of the federal government to take

discretionary action. Moreover, we believe that an additional input channel—that of institutionalised and powerful scientific advice—would further erode the federal government’s already very limited room to manoeuvre. In critical situations, such as in the fall of 2020, the government may have had a good reason for muting science to remain capable of acting.

Acknowledgments

Open access funding provided by Universitat Bern.

Klaus Armingeon is guest professor, Polytechnic University of Turin and researcher at the University of Zurich, Department of Political Science. *Fritz Sager* is Professor of Political Science at the KPM Center for Public Management and co-head of the Ethics and Policy Lab of the Multidisciplinary Center for Infectious Diseases, University of Bern, Switzerland.

²⁶Boswell, et al., ‘The comparative “court politics” of Covid-19’.