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Institutionalised Debates and Unscripted Instances in Cantonal Parliaments

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Abstract

Switzerland is a multilingual federal state with a political system and culture (traditionally) based on consensus-democratic principles. But consensus-democracy does not mean a lack of conflict and dispute. Rather, disagreement and negotiations on public and political issues are institutionalised as highly formalised parliamentary debates. However, even these meticulously controlled deliberations may sometimes get off track. Using the example of two cantonal parliaments, we show how so-called unscripted instances may play an important role in fostering a sense of community among the Members of Parliament (MPs) and thus, ultimately, contribute to a consensus-democratic culture in Swiss politics.

Keywords

Switzerland, politics, cantonal parliaments, consensus-democracy, language, Neuchâtel, Schwyz

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A) Introduction

As a small multilingual und multicultural country, Switzerland is dependent on a certain degree of societal cohesion and civil coexistence. The close-knit structures of the Swiss “nation of will” favour cooperation, personal responsibility and a tolerance of diversity and minorities. Indeed, the concept of consensus can be considered to be a mostly implicit, but established default mode for interpersonal interaction in public, at work or in politics.¹

In politics, consensus as an ideal default mode holds true for both the federalist political *system* with its established power-sharing institutions as well as for the political *culture* associated with it, including explicit rules and implicit norms that foster exchange and dialogue. Indeed, Lijphart (1994) defined Switzerland as a prototype of a consensus (or consociational) democracy. In contrast to majoritarian models of democracy, power-sharing and collaborative decision-making are crucial, and political parties and interest groups are brought together in a grand coalition to participate in comprehensive decision-making processes (cf. Linder/Müller 2021: 191-206).

Regarding the executive level, the term “concordance” refers to the collegiality of the socio-linguistic diverse Federal Council, which since 1959 integrates the four biggest parties (known as the “Zauberformel”). Regarding legislature, Bühlmann (2022) speaks of an “institutionalised obligation for dialogue”, i.e. the requirement to allow for other/minority perspectives, and Heidelberger und Bühlmann (2019) define debates in Swiss parliament as rather “unemotional”, since conflicts have generally been resolved earlier in committees (cf. Lüthi 2019).

Comparing Germany and Switzerland, Jarren et al. (2010) show how different political systems involve different speaking styles: In German government-opposition-politics, parliamentarians in the Bundestag in Berlin tend to argue decidedly more conflict-oriented and less factual than in the federal parliament in Bern. Indeed, by comparing Swiss and German text corpora linguistically, Schröter (2024) shows that the terms “consensus” and “compromise” are positively connotated in Swiss political discourse.

In direct-democratic Switzerland, stakeholders need to find compromises and majorities that will not refuted by the public in referenda. To do so, politicians need not only *talk* to one another: They also need to (try to) *understand* each other, both linguistically and politically. Since it’s the tone that makes the music, language is bound to play a crucial role for the well-functioning of the traditional consensus-mode in multilingual multicultural Switzerland. While the role of language in/for the Swiss political system and culture has occasionally been empirically investigated (cf. Eisner/Fux 1992, Roth/Dürscheid 2010, Schröter 2022, Schröter 2024), empirical research on language in parliament is scarce, and the focus lies mainly on the national level (cf. Müller/Zumbach 2017, Bühlmann et al. 2019, Müller 2019, Lüthi 2019, Schwab 2014; Steiner 2006 for the cantonal

¹ <http://www.lebendige-traditionen.ch/tradition/de/home/traditionen/konsenskultur-und-direkte-demokratie.html> [last accessed 18. 12. 25]

parliament of Zurich). Moreover, comparative analyses of cantonal parliaments are rare (but cf. Stadlin 1990, Vatter 2002, Strebel 2022, www.kantonsparlamente.ch).

By addressing such gaps in the research agenda, we aim to provide sociological and linguistic insights into how Swiss democracy operates on the level of cantonal parliaments.² Specifically, we aim to provide some preliminary answers to the following research question:

How do political debates and their accompanying language use in cantonal parliaments contribute to the (traditional) consensus-democratic norms and values in Swiss politics?

Our article tries to answer this question by looking at institutionalized interactions as well as occasional deviations in parliamentary debates. The Swiss consensus model relies not only on legal rules, but on institutionalized interaction rituals that frame political conflict. An institutionalized interaction suggests stability; it is a closely regulated exchange with written rules and norms. However, consensus is not maintained only through formal instructions. It is also present in unscripted instances.

We therefore offer two important points for reflection: a detailed description of unscripted instances in parliament, and a reflection on their importance as a way of maintaining consensus, rather than as errors or ruptures in regular proceedings, as they may seem at first sight. Despite a meticulously pre-planned structure and agenda, certain digressions may be allowed in parliament, not least since they help to create a shared identity and a sense of community between the Members of Parliament (MPs) (across parties). We postulate that this, in turn, facilitates the seeking and finding of majorities, pragmatic solutions, shifting alliances and compromises across party-lines – all of which are typical of and crucial for the cooperation- and consensus-based Swiss political system and culture.

Our research is based on observational data from altogether 18 sittings of two cantonal parliaments, one in French-speaking and the other in German-speaking Switzerland: the Grand Conseil of Neuchâtel and the Kantonsrat Schwyz. The legislative bodies of Schwyz and Neuchâtel are identical in size (100 members) but differ in history, members' characteristics and political leanings. As such, they provide interesting case studies for empirical comparison. In the following, we will focus on commonalities on the level of legal regulations, implicit norms and off-track moments in the two cantonal parliaments.

By integrating and combining sociological, linguistic and political approaches, our interdisciplinary empirical study is based on non-participant observations and interviews as the primary types of data. Due to the backstage nature of committee meetings, private discussions, and digital communications, the analysis is limited to publicly displayed parliamentary debates frontstage (cf. Goffman 1959).³ The parliamentary sittings were

² This paper is embedded into the interdisciplinary research project “How do you speak Swiss?” at Fribourg/Freiburg University (Mobiliar Research Cluster on Resilience), which studies the interplay of law, language and politics in Switzerland.

³ MPs' external political communication (e.g., media interventions, public speeches, interactions with interest groups, election campaigns, social media etc.) were not included into data collection and analysis.

followed both in person and, to a lesser degree, via live-streams. The following data were collected between March 2024 and March 2025:

	Schwyz	Neuchâtel
Observations (on-site)	7	7
Observations (live-stream)	2	2
Interviews with MPs	9	4
Interviews (stakeholders)	3	1

Tab. 1 Data Overview

The observational data were collected by in-person visits or by watching the session via live-stream. In both settings, extensive notes were taken. If they were hand-written, the notes were digitalized immediately after the visit. For analysis and interpretation, the page-long notes were read and re-read repeatedly to find similarities, commonalities and patterns and to sort the content into overarching categories. The 17 interviews were digitally recorded and the audio-files broadly transcribed. The transcriptions were then also interpreted qualitatively in a process similar to the observational data. Both types of data were combined to draw preliminary conclusions about the role of cantonal parliaments' institutionalised debates for Swiss consensus-based politics.

In this paper, findings from Neuchâtel and Schwyz will be described, compared and contrasted with a particular focus on typical proceedings of parliamentary sessions and deviations (unscripted instances). The structure of the article is as follows: In section B), we provide an overview of the two cantonal parliaments, and describe rules and norms of their proceedings with a specific focus on setting, decorum, language and other typical features. In section C), we give examples of exceptions from the rule, i.e. so-called unplanned moments or unscripted instances. In section D), we ask how those deviations can be interpreted from a sociological, linguistic and political perspective, respectively.

B) Looking at Cantonal Parliaments

In this section, we provide some background information on the two cantonal parliaments observed (Neuchâtel and Schwyz) and then describe typical proceedings and language use in parliamentary debates, providing concrete examples from our data.

1. Kantonsrat Schwyz

The 100 members of the Cantonal Parliament of Schwyz (Kantonsrat Schwyz, cf. Dettling 1990) are elected by popular vote for a four-year term of office. In the legislative term 2024-2028, the parliament comprises of 80 male and 20 female MPs between 23 and 69 years of age (average age 48 years). The politicians carry out their mandate alongside their actual profession, for instance as lawyers, farmers, IT specialists, carpenters, civil servants, employees, entrepreneurs, doctors or teachers. 90 of the 100 surnames of the MPs are traditional Swiss or Schwyz-based family names (e.g. Beeler, Camenzind or Reichmuth).

Politically, the SVP (UDC/engl. Swiss People's Party) is the strongest parliamentary group with 38 seats of the 100 seats. Die Mitte (Le Centre/engl. The Centre), which used to dominate politics in Schwyz until around 2000, and the FDP (FDP.Die Liberalen/PLR. Les Libéraux-Radicaux/engl. Liberals) have 23 seats or 19 seats, respectively. The SP/Greens (PS/engl. Social-Democratic Party bzw. Grüne/Verts) hold 15 seats (13 SP, 2 Greens) and the Green Liberals (Grünliberale, GLP/Vert libéraux, PVL) 5 seats each. Thus, the Kantonsrat Schwyz has been and continues to be conservatively dominated.

The Kantonsrat Schwyz meets once a month, with the exception of January, July and August (session-free). In general, the session lasts one day for eight hours with a one-hour lunch break and a 20-minute coffee break in the morning and afternoon. The sessions take place in the historical town hall (Rathaus) of the cantonal capital Schwyz. They are always attended in corpore by the seven members of the Cantonal Council (Regierungsrat). The preparation and conduct of the meetings by the president (chairperson), elected for one year, are regulated by the rules of parliamentary procedure (Geschäftsordnung). Since 2019, the rules of parliamentary procedure specify that the "language of negotiation is German, usually Swiss Dialect" (§ 73 Abs. 3 GOKR) ("Verhandlungssprache ist Deutsch, in der Regel Schweizer Mundart").⁴

2. Grand Conseil de Neuchâtel

Unlike Schwyz, the language spoken in the cantonal parliament of Neuchâtel (Grand Conseil) is French, the canton's official language. But like Schwyz, the Grand Conseil consists of 100 members.⁵ Along with reducing the number of MPs from 115 to 100, the canton eliminated its six districts in 2021, replacing them with four "electoral regions" (Littoral, Montagnes, Val-de-Travers, and Val-de-Ruz).

The canton of Neuchâtel was the first in Switzerland to elect a woman, Raymonde Schweizer, to its parliament in 1960 (Hebeisen 2017). Since 2021, it is the first cantonal parliament in Switzerland with a female majority (58 of 100 members). The average age of the MPs is 44 years, and thus younger than in the previous term and younger than the Kantonsrat Schwyz (both 48 years).

Like Schwyz, the Grand Council of Neuchâtel is a citizen legislature or part-time parliament (parlement de milice/Milizparlament). That is, MPs are usually part-time and not full-time politicians, so they in general continue working in their regular job. Most members work in professions that require tertiary education or advanced professional training, including 10 lawyers, jurists, and similar roles, while others are employed in domains such as teaching, education, health, medicine, communication, and administration. Only

⁴ All translations from German or French into English by the authors, occasionally assisted by DeepL and ChatGPT.

⁵ This has been the case since 2017; between 1965 and 2021, it had been composed of 115 members. Therefore, the chamber in the Castle where the sittings are held was originally designed to accommodate a larger assembly, which is why 15 seats are unoccupied nowadays.

4 MPs come from industry and crafts⁶. Family names reflect a wide range of linguistic backgrounds, including Swiss French, Swiss German, Italian, and more.

In the legislative period in question (2021-2025), the largest party is the Liberal-Radical Party (PLR/FDP), holding 32 seats, followed by the Socialist Party (PS/SP) with 21 seats. The Union Démocratique du Centre (UDC/SVP) has 8 seats, as does the Parti Ouvrier et Populaire (PoP). The Centre (Le Centre/Die Mitte) has 4 seats. The Green (19 seats) and Green-Liberal parties (9 seats) often play a key role in shaping majorities.

The Grand Conseil meets ten times per year, and each sitting usually lasts one day from 9 AM to 5 PM. The final session on the budget may take longer, usually one and a half days. Like any other Swiss cantonal parliament, the debates are open to the public. Unlike the limited capacity for visitors in Schwyz, the gallery, situated at the back of the room, can accommodate over 100 guests.

3. Parliamentary Proceedings

3.1 *Setting and Decorum*

In Neuchâtel, the Grand Conseil meets in the historic Castle of Neuchâtel overlooking the city and Lake Neuchâtel, while in Schwyz the cantonal parliament convenes in the historic town hall on the main square of the cantonal capital. In both cases, the parliamentary setting is strongly symbolic and embedded in cantonal history. As in other Swiss parliaments, seating is arranged in a semicircle, visually expressing the idea of democratic representation: individual parties and positions are differentiated yet form a collective whole.

The material and visual environment further reflects cantonal political cultures. In Neuchâtel, white silhouettes on the front wall symbolically evoke the presence of the people being represented, whereas in Schwyz the wooden interior, religious stained-glass windows and historical paintings underscore the canton's traditional orientation. The atmosphere in both parliaments is formal, though more strictly so in Schwyz, where a formal dress code is enforced and male MPs routinely wear suits and ties. In Neuchâtel, dress norms are more relaxed. Ties are worn alongside jumpers and jeans.

3.2 *Rules and Regulations*

Parliamentary sittings are strictly structured and highly ordered. Political principles, processes and procedures are regulated and formulated in specific legal documents. Their aim is to guarantee orderly and efficient meetings and to define the rights and duties of the MPs. In Neuchâtel, the law called “Loi d'organisation du Grand Conseil (OGC)” comprises 82 pages. In Schwyz, the regulatory document is entitled “Geschäftsordnung des Kantonsrates (GOKR)” and comprises 25 pages.

⁶ Personal statistics conducted using the list available on the Grand Council website: ‘Membres par ordre alphabétique - République et canton de Neuchâtel’, n.d. <<https://www.ne.ch:443/autorites/GC/composition/Pages/Alphabetique.aspx>> [accessed 10 February 2025].

These legal documents contain rules regarding, among others, the meetings agendas, oral contributions (right to speak, speaking time, order of speakers), votes and elections, committees (formation, composition, operation), motions and procedural requests, immunity, disciplinary measures, and rules on publicity and transparency, for instance as regards minutes or visitors.

For example, it is specified that “Le président ou la présidente du Grand Conseil veille au respect des temps de parole” (Art. 279 OGC) (“The president of the Grand Council ensures that speaking times are respected”) or “Die Verhandlungen des Kantonsrates beginnen mit der Verrichtung eines stillen Gebetes, worauf der Präsident die Sitzung eröffnet” (§ 73 Abs. 1 GOKR). (“The proceedings of the Cantonal Council begin with a moment of silent prayer, after which the president opens the meeting.”)

3.3 *Language in Parliament*

Language comes in many different shades. Obviously, people speak or write differently according to who is communicating when and where to whom and why. For instance, everyday language spoken in informal contexts differs decisively from the formal language used by a university professor giving a lecture. Burkhardt (1998: 98) distinguishes political language as a) the language used by citizens, interest groups or journalists to talk about politics or political issues as well as b) the language of politics and politicians, either to talk to each other (internal language use) or to the citizens as voters (external language use).

Language in parliament displays the following characteristics: formality and factualness, publicness and orientation towards multiple addressees (one’s own party, other MPs, the media, visitors ...), a focus on persuasion as the main intention of the speaker (alongside information), intertextuality with other discourses, a certain orchestration by the pre-prepared agenda, and a specialised vocabulary and phraseology. For instance, in (Swiss) German parliaments, the president may say “Ich nehme ins erste Mehr ...” (verbatim “I take into the first majority ...”) to indicate that the voting is about to start – a phrase never used outside the parliamentary context.

Some of these characteristics are laid down in the legal specifications of parliaments. In Schwyz, these are the rules of parliamentary procedure (“Geschäftsordnung”, GOKR) or the guidance for MPs (“Wegleitung für die Mitglieder des Kantonsrates”). For example, in Chapter 5 of the “Wegleitung”, entitled ‘Gepflogenheiten’ (engl. Customs/Conventions), MPs are informed that they must refrain from applause and spontaneous interruptions during the meeting (“Während der Beratung des Kantonsrates wird nicht applaudiert. Spontane Zwischenrufe sind verpönt.” (p. 21)). In the GOKR, MPs are informed that those wishing to speak must register electronically, after which the president gives the floor to the next speaker in the order of registration (§ 80 Abs. 1 und 2 GOKR). Also, in general, MPs are not allowed to speak about the same topic more than once (§ 80 Abs. 3 GOKR). The GOKR also specifies that “Die Mitglieder des Kantonsrates und des Regierungsrates geben ihre Voten möglichst kurz, sachlich, klar und anständig ab.

Schriftliche Vorlagen werden nur ergänzt und nicht wiederholt” (§ 82 Abs. 1 GOKR). The president is given the right to limit the speaking time, to interrupt speakers, if necessary, to remind them to stay on topic in case they deviate, to call speakers to order if they violate parliamentary decorum, in particular by using offensive remarks, and even withdraw their right to speak if they disregard these warnings (§ 82 Abs. 4 GOKR).

Regarding the language of debate, the “Wegleitung” (p. 5) echoes § 73 Abs. 3 GOKR (“Verhandlungssprache ist Deutsch, in der Regel Schweizer Mundart”) by ruling that during debates, dialect is (to be) spoken. Moreover, readers learn that MPs deliver their statements standing up at their desk and that they must begin with the standardized address “Herr Präsident / Frau Präsidentin, meine Damen und Herren” (“Mr President / Madam President, ladies and gentlemen”).⁷

3.4 *Typical Features of Parliamentary Debates*

To the audience of televised parliamentary deliberations during plenary sessions, these may seem like ‘real’ debates on political issues. But in fact, in general, they are neither typical discussions nor actual negotiations. There is no spontaneous take-turning, i.e. back and forth of utterances between the interlocutors, as in typical everyday debates, for instance among family members or friends. Instead, MPs are allocated the right to speak by the president. It is also the president who opens, chairs and closes each meeting, who decides when coffee breaks or lunch breaks are taken (and for how long) and whether certain items on the agenda must be postponed to the next meeting.

During the parliamentary meeting, speaker and topic progression follow strict norms, for instance as regards types of parliamentary interventions. Usually, MPs who presided a committee first present the results of the committee’s debates, then other MPs may state their party’s position on an issue, and others may speak up to defend or attack an idea, respectively. In their speeches, MPs may give information on a certain issue, but mostly they present their party’s position, argue for or against something, try to persuade others to vote in their favour, and thus woo for acceptance of one’s (party) position by means of argumentation.

As becomes clear, parliamentary debates are mostly clearly structured orchestrations of pre-prepared speeches on a definite item on the agenda (cf. Steiner 2006). As Palonen (2011: 13-15) points out, “learning the parliamentary language, MPs learn not to discuss ‘things’ as such, but rather items on the actual parliamentary agenda”. Speeches are delivered orally, but are oftentimes clearly based on written texts, often including prepared pre-written manuscripts that are read out aloud off a paper or laptop screen.

Moreover, since the MPs know that their statements are recorded and will later be transcribed and documented online in writing (minutes), they usually take care to prepare convincing statements with a logically structured argumentation. As some interview

⁷ Unlike in parliaments in the UK or Commonwealth, Swiss parliamentarians’ speeches are not directed towards the chairperson (president), but to the entire assembly.

partners explained, they rehearse important speeches two or three times at home in front of the mirror, or at least they did so when they were still new to parliament.

Furthermore, the public nature and documentation in minutes further impact the content of the speeches. As one MP at the Grand Conseil of Fribourg/Freiburg pointed out during a heated debate: “It’s one thing to discuss things in the corridors, but it’s quite another to talk about them publicly during a recorded session” (Fribourg/Freiburg, 11.02.25, authors’ translation from French). This points not least to a clear distinction made by the MPs between what is happening frontstage, where debate is mostly staged, and backstage, where the real discussions are taking place and where MPs can presumably be more “themselves” than on the public stage of parliamentary sittings (cf. Goffman 1959).

As we have seen, parliamentary meetings take place within a strictly regulated formal framework with clearly defined activities, conduct, contents and language (variety, register and style). In general, members of parliament know when they are allowed to speak and when not, how long their contribution may be, what words, register and style they are supposed to use, and so on. That is, much of what is happening during parliamentary sittings is written down and can be anticipated. However, as in everyday life, it is impossible to regulate or foresee everything. In the next section, we illustrate what we have come to call unscripted instances.

C) Unscripted Instances in Parliaments

By unforeseen unscripted instances, we mean moments when the pre-prepared institutionalised discussions are going off track. This may happen for instance by the debate turning more emotional than usual, by a joking remark making the room erupt in laughter, or by requiring a postponement of the debate from the public frontstage back to the parties’ private backstage in order to re-negotiate the current agenda item. We first provide some examples from the Kantonsrat Schwyz, followed by a selection of unscripted instances from the Grand Conseil de Neuchâtel.

1. Examples of Unscripted Instances in the Kantonsrat Schwyz

The Kantonsrat Schwyz usually gives the impression of a very disciplined institutional body: Meetings start exactly on time, presidents are well-prepared and in general, all or most agenda items are treated as planned. But of course, even the Kantonsrat Schwyz is not immune to occasional short spontaneous intermezzi. They include unintentional trivial mistakes such as a slip of the tongue, but also intentional humorous remarks. Both instances may lead to a moment of distraction from the regular procedures and may cause some or all members of parliament to chuckle or even laugh out loud. Humorous comments may be uttered by the president of the parliament, by Cantonal Councillors or by MPs, and may include both spontaneous witty remarks or long-lasting running gags. In Schwyz, this may consist of MPs teasing each other on issues such as gender-neutral language or party positions, for instance as regards incompatibilities between the SVP and the GLP in Schwyz. To exemplify such humorous witty remarks, which occurred

regularly during the nine sessions observed in the Kantonsrat Schwyz between 2024 and 2025, let us look at three quotes from the former president Jonathan Prelicz (SP).

- (A) After coffee break, with most MPs strolling in 1-2 minutes late, still vividly chatting with each another despite the next speaker being ready to deliver his statement, President Prelicz smilingly remarked into the microphone: “To all those who are late, please do so quietly.” (“An alle, die zu spät kommen, bitte ich, dies leise zu tun.”). Big laughter erupted in the room.
- (B) After an undisputed request to change a paragraph in a law, which had even been supported by the Cantonal Council, the parliament votes “Yes” without a single “No” vote. After announcing this result, Prelicz joked: “We narrowly missed a casting vote.” (“Wir sind knapp an einem Stichentscheid vorbeigekommen.”)
- (C) The last meeting of the legislature period is traditionally concluded by an informal get-together (apéro). During the sitting, an MP suggested they spend some more time on a certain agenda item, since after all the agenda was rather short on that day. The president responded: “Indeed, we don’t have that many items on the agenda, but we *do* have an aperitif.” (“Wir haben zwar nicht so viele Traktanden, aber wir haben noch einen Apéro.”) Prelicz’ witty-minded spontaneous comment caused the same reaction of affirmative laughter as usual.

Most unscripted instances in Schwyz consist of such short publicly uttered witty remarks by the president, but also by the government or MPs. Their amount varies in each meeting, depending on a variety of factors such as chairperson, agenda items, length of the meeting, weather conditions (e.g. drowsiness due to summer heat) or number and type of guests.

Interestingly, such moments are not always included in the official minutes (Wortprotokoll), maybe so as not to compromise the (impression of) seriousness of the parliament. However, a best-of selection of the quotes can regularly be read the next day in the local newspaper “Bote der Urschweiz” close to the report on the Kantonsrat meeting itself (“Worte des Rates”). This was the case with the following example from the December 2024 session of the Kantonsrat Schwyz as well.

- (D) During the agenda item “Aufgaben- und Finanzplan 2025-2028” (planning tasks and finances 2025-2028), the debate got intense as the MPs started to discuss a specific topic (a certain seemingly controversial educational program). The debate intensified on the issue whether teenage students from the so-called Outer-Schwyz region of the canton should be forced to have to attend this educational program at a certain school in Inner-Schwyz (instead of being allowed to attend classes in the neighbouring canton of Lucerne or Zurich). To travel to Inner-Schwyz, the pupils from the outer part of the canton would have to get up at 5 o’clock in the morning, or perhaps could not even make it that early in the morning with public transportation, as one Outer-Schwyz MP pointed out accusingly. Some agreed, others disagreed, and the debate rose in intensity, dividing MPs from the two parts

of the canton in opposite camps. As a response, after having been given the word by the president, a female MP from the SP party, apparently well-known in parliament for frequently advocating a better public transportation system, wittily remarked: “As I have heard repeatedly now, our public transport in the canton is not good enough – we should really work on this.” (“Was ich jetzt vermehrt gehört habe: Wir haben ein schlechtes ÖV-Angebot [im Kanton] – daran sollten wir arbeiten.”) The room erupted in laughter.

2. Examples of Unscripted Instances in the Grand Conseil de Neuchâtel

Humour is also very present in the Grand Council of Neuchâtel. It consistently accompanies the various departures from protocol, helps to veil criticism that might otherwise be too direct, and serves to ease the atmosphere. Below are a few examples illustrating short unscripted instances (examples E-G) as well as a lengthier deviation (example H) in the Grand Council of Neuchâtel in 2024 and 2025:

- (E) During a session on 21 January 2025, an elected member of the Socialist Party defended an urgency request in order to ask questions that were not foreseen within the framework of the session. To defend his urgency request, the deputy wished to speak twice. The president corrected him: “An urgency is only one minute.” The deputy, surprised, replied: “Have I already gone over?” The president answered, “Ah! Earlier you already spoke for two minutes!” The deputy responded, “So if I can just...” – “You have 30 seconds!” – “Then in 30 seconds...” and then went on to speak longer (for around one more minute). The room burst into laughter at his reply, and the president smiled as well. During the same session, but later, another urgency request was discussed. The president again asked the same deputy whether he wished to speak. He answered with a smile and a wave of the hand: “Oh no, not this time.” A soft murmur of laughter ran through the room.
- (F) During a session on 5 November 2025, the debate focused on the closure of post offices in certain municipalities. The deputies interrogated the Cantonal Council. The Cantonal Councillor in charge of the issue asked rhetorically, “How can a local postal service be maintained?” He then continued by explaining how Swiss Post discusses the matter with each municipality. Reading his reply from a prepared text, he said: “One must avoid a dogmatic stance, and the head of the department ...”. He paused, stopped on what he had just said, and corrected himself: “Uh, myself.” At these words, everyone laughed. This minor incident revealed to the deputies that the text had been written by someone other than the councillor himself, which prompted laughter throughout the Grand Council.
- (G) In December 2024, during budget sessions, a parliamentarian from the Socialist group requested a recess to deliberate on a joint position regarding a tax reduction issue. The recess was granted, and 15 minutes later, the same spokesperson announced an unexpected counter-proposal in the form of a motion. It was not on the agenda which surprised everyone and disrupted previously established

agreements. The spokesperson defended it vigorously, but it was ultimately rejected. Afterwards, the parliamentarian confided in me that the entire maneuver had been planned in advance. Its purpose was to “keep the party’s position alive” on an issue already decided: “We knew the tax reduction would be voted in,” he told me. Thus, the “last-minute” stance and its staging were in fact calculated.

- (H) When digressions from the pre-planned protocol last too long or go too far, not least because of agenda items charged with significance and emotionality, members of the Grand Council may request a suspension of the session, i.e. a temporary interruption of the debates. The decision lies with the president. When the debate is a “real” debate, it is then paused and MPs go in other rooms to discuss among their parliamentary group (party). This was the case in Neuchâtel on 29 May 2024 after heated and highly emotional exchanges on the wolf issue (“I am moved by what is being said!”, one deputy remarked). The vote was suspended and after the internal discussion was postponed.

Unlike Neuchâtel, a suspension of the session in form of a debate interruption was not observed in the Kantonsrat Schwyz. However, as one interviewee remarked, WhatsApp messages may be sent around within the party during a debate by the party’s president in case voting behaviour needs to be adjusted instantly, perhaps due to an unexpected spontaneous *Ordnungsantrag* (a suggestion for procedural change).

Although the instances described above are “unscripted” instances, they nonetheless integrate into the functioning of local parliaments. More or less easy to identify for an external observer, either intentional or unintentional, and varying in length and content, they can be interpreted in different ways. We propose two lines of interpretation, each grounded in a different disciplinary perspective: either sociological or linguistic.

D) Interpreting the Data

Unscripted instances are for us exceptions from the rule of strictly regulated, meticulously pre-planned parliamentary debate proceedings, i.e. transgressions of the orderly ongoing meeting or, so to speak, a sort of “dancing out of line” by individual members of parliament, either on purpose or by accident. After providing some examples from our data in the previous section, the question is how to best interpret them. Of course, as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon, there cannot be one single explanation fitting it all. Instead, respecting the interdisciplinary nature of our research, we chose to put forward different interpretative approaches in this working paper, taking into consideration and trying to combine and integrate various studies, models and theories from sociology, linguistics and political sciences.

1. Unscripted Instances from a Sociological Perspective

1.1 *Goffman's Frame Theory in Parliamentary Debates*

From a sociological perspective, Erving Goffman's (1974) frame theory appears particularly relevant for understanding the unscripted instances of parliamentary debates.

The frame analysis theory formulated by the North American sociologist Erving Goffman is based on the following question: What are the conditions that make us believe that what is happening is real? These conditions are the frames of experience. Goffman describes different types of frames. Primary frames are the initial frames, those that do not refer to any other frame. Eating, for example, can be a primary frame: it follows norms but is understandable in itself without needing to refer to other frames. Transformed frames are secondary frames: they are the transformations of primary frames: a religious banquet is a ceremony that transforms the primary frame of a meal by adding layers of meaning to it.

The initial primary frame of parliamentary sessions is that of discussion, debate, and (certainly in the Swiss context) of finding solutions, compromises and thus consensus. Parliamentary sittings (the frontstages) are a modelling and the institutionalisation of the primary frame: they imitate and repeat it with the aim of publicly performing and reproducing the more "natural" or "authentic" debates that have taken place in the committees or during preparatory party meetings (the backstages). Attending a parliamentary session as an outsider (such as a researcher new to the field) or simply a participant with little knowledge of the prevailing norms creates the impression of watching a play: the structure seems very rigid, the procedure seems pre-planned in detail and even the statements by the MPs are in general not spontaneously generated, but oftentimes read from sheets of paper or tablet screens. Yet, sometimes this entirely institutionalised debate play gets interrupted by what we have called unscripted instances or unforeseen moments. These either reinforce the staging element of the debate play or else weaken the performance aspect.

Since consensus-orientation has traditionally been a given in the Swiss political system and culture, the institutionalised debates in (cantonal) parliaments furthermore take care to reproduce this element in their proceedings. For instance, both majority and minority positions are allowed to be heard (cf. Bühlmann 2022), and the formal address ("Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren") further fosters a civilized debate atmosphere. Moreover, spontaneous interventions ("Zwischenrufe") are strictly discouraged and rarely ever happen (in contrast to for instance debates in British Parliament or the German Bundestag). That is, cooperation takes central stage in the transformed frames of institutionalised debates in Swiss cantonal parliaments.

1.2 *A Categorization of Unscripted Instances*

What is the significance of so-called unscripted instances in all of this? As we have seen, we define such unforeseen instances as a sort of exceptions to the rule. They are for us

interesting as they make it possible to observe how the consensual framework is tested, adjusted, or reaffirmed by MPs. Instances. As a preliminary conclusion, we suggest classifying these unscripted instances into two categories based on the following distinction. The first category deepens the “show” of the consensus while the second seems to break it.

1. *The show within the show* or the reinforced staging of consensus

Unscripted instances here deepen or intensify the “debate play”. On the one hand, a “show” of its own may suddenly unfold within the primary “play” (thus, the transformed frame) itself: here, MPs play with the rules, for example, like the MP who allows himself to speak for longer, even though he knows he is not allowed to do so (see example E above). In this example, the deputy was momentarily unsettled when he realized that he had exceeded his allotted time, but this did not prevent him from continuing and playfully bending the rules in the process, turning his intervention into a brief funny performance. He probably allowed himself this because he knew he could slightly exceed the limits without causing any problem. Rules are strong enough not to be completely respected and become part of the show. In the Swiss context, this could be interpreted as a sign of confidence in the strength of consensus. The rules are sufficiently internalized to allow small deviations without threatening it, but such unforeseen instances are only possible for those who have a perfect command of the codes at play. Only those with full “Parliamentary Literacy” (cf. Palonen 2011) are capable of it. Only once a MP has been accepted as a legitimate and respected peer by others, may he or she allow themselves for instance to crack a joke during his or her formal statement. In contrast, when a newer and obviously less well-known MP in Schwyz first emotionally interrupted another speaker and later allowed himself to take the floor *after* a member of the government had spoken, these two No-Go’s were not well received by the room, triggering malicious murmuring (Schwyz, 28.03.24).

On the other hand, the audience may sometimes observe a “show” for the sake of “showing off” – to the other MPs, to the audience, or simply for effect. In this case, MPs may, for example, pretend to be genuinely angry in order to produce a strong impression of authenticity. They will thus adopt a more serious, angry tone, with gestures that are sometimes more irritated and characterized by sharp movements. It can be defined as an attempt to return to the primary frame (that of a real debate), to break free from the institutionalised frame, and it is, obviously, itself a form of “staging”. Example G from Neuchâtel illustrates this scenario, in which the socialist MP prepared a session suspension followed by the “unexpected” submission of a motion although everything had been planned in advance. This “showing off” also serves consensus, because it allows the expression of conflict without a real break within parliament and between the MPs. Disagreement is dramatized, but within a controlled framework. Consensus does not mean the absence of conflict, but a ritualized way of managing it.

2. *Removing layers of the “play” (going back to a primary frame of debate):*

Alternatively, certain off-road moments seem to move away from the “play” element of parliamentary debates and appear to be more real, or authentic. They in some sense

remove layers of meaning from the institutionalised debate. First, a frame break: For Goffman, a break in the frame corresponds to a moment when we realise that we have misunderstood a situation. The rules are suddenly suspended and reshaped while the situation reconfigures itself. These moments involve forgetting the rules, genuine unpremeditated mistakes, or slips of the tongue. Frame breaks, such as slips of the tongue (for example, when a Cantonal Councillor says “Uh, myself.”), reveal the deeply institutionalized nature of consensus. It is precisely because the actors share a common framework that the disruption is immediately noticed and corrected. The quick repair of the frame, often through humour, becomes a consensual act.

Humour is a way to transform the secondary frame of the “fake” debate back into a “real” exchange of blows, but in a soft and composed way, thus strengthening the central political philosophy of a consensus-democracy. In Schwyz, this is achieved among other things by the afore-mentioned running-gags. But humour is not only used to bend the main frame of debate, but also to repair it. As explained earlier, a break in the frame is a moment of uncertainty, often the result of a mistake. According to Goffman, such moments can trigger laughter, which helps to repair the situation. In Neuchâtel, for example, the president had given the floor to the Cantonal Councillor, who began his response. The president suddenly interrupted him: “Mr Cantonal Councillor, I’m sorry, I forgot to give Mr G. (a MP) the floor for his introduction. I apologise.” The room laughed very lightly. The resident then repeated, “I apologise”, thereby closing the parenthesis on this rupture of the frame. The laughter it generated served to restore order after the brief disruption caused by the president’s lapse.

Second, we may sometimes observe a return to the primary frame of debate. Institutionalisation collapses, for instance by discourses unfolding spontaneously, often emotionally. The primary frame of dispute and debate takes precedence over the formal regulatory framework of the “normal” institutionalised parliamentary deliberation. Here, returns to the debate frame through spontaneous speeches or a temporary collapse of formalism can signal real tensions. If emotions overflow the regulated framework, this may indicate that consensus is more fragile on certain issues (for example, immigration, the environment, or security). In this case, non-institutional moments do not strengthen consensus; they reveal its limits. They show where conflict can no longer be fully institutionalised. We identified the wolf issue (“Should culling of wolves that endanger livestock be permitted?”), health issues, education and finances (taxes) in both Neuchâtel and Schwyz particularly likely to spark such spillovers. Overinvested with (personal or ideological) meaning and significance also to the voters, these questions allow deputies to “speak” to prospective voters directly, which is often realised through long, vivid, image-rich speeches for effects of “show”, but also more spontaneous statements. The session does not serve to account for mere exchanges of pre-conceived political positions; it becomes a (media) platform in itself. Of course, every debate is public, especially in times of live-streams, but not every topic will necessarily generate an actual audience. But certain topics such as (raising) taxes, (the closing of) regional hospitals or “the wolf” certainly will.

As secondary frames, unscripted instances often begin and end with an implicit or explicit reminder of parliamentary conventions or rules. These small or longer “dancing out of line” instances reveal how flexible (especially the Swiss) institutional system is, since it manages to include among other things brief moments of humour and wittiness into de facto serious high-stakes situations. As reminders of how we are all just humans, despite different political views, such slips of the tongue and going off track moments thus ultimately contribute to creating and maintaining among the MPs a level of confidence and trust necessary for power-sharing,⁸ to reinforcing commonalities between members of parliament, i.e. parliamentary identity, and, by the same token, strengthening the building of consensus highly crucial for Swiss politics. But these moments can also serve to humanize highly formal processes, thereby reinforcing that same sense of belonging. However, as we will explain below, unscripted instances can also reinforce hierarchies between those who master the rules, and know how to “save their face” and therefore exclude newcomers.

2. Socio- und politolinguistic Perspectives on Unscripted Instances

2.1 *Mastering Parliamentish*

To become a legitimate politician, it is not enough to have been elected. To successfully participate as a member of parliament, one is required to learn and master a specific linguistic variety, which we call “Parliamentish”. Unlike natural languages, Parliamentish has no native speakers; it must be actively acquired receptively and productively across vocabulary, semantics, idioms, grammar, politeness, register, and discourse. These competences form part of a broader “Parliamentary Literacy”, defined as the ability to judge parliamentary activities and act effectively within them (cf. Palonen 2011).

Acquisition of Parliamentish is gradual. One MP interviewed in Schwyz reported it took them about a year after election to grasp both procedures and content. Challenges include technical and legal vocabulary (e.g., “Untermargigkeit”, “Zielband”, “Schwankungsreserven”) and institutional expressions (“etwas ausmehren”, “etwas erwahren”, “legiferieren”, “eine Motion abschreiben”), as well as abbreviations like “Stawiko” (“Staatswirtschaftskommission”). Words such as “wolf”, “freedom”, “taxes” or even “Schwyz” often carry ideological weight and thus evoke divergent associations. Disputes over framing can be sharp, as illustrated when, during a fiery debate on the asylum topic, a right-wing MP equated the canton to a “dumping ground” for rejected asylum seekers, which prompted a left-wing colleague to vehemently protest against the dehumanizing metaphor.

Learning Parliamentish also entails mastering procedures and norms, often with peer support or formal training. Newcomers in Schwyz, for example, are instructed not to read speeches verbatim in Standard German. Regardless of their profession and linguistic

⁸ We thank a reviewer for this valuable comment.

aptitude, MPs must adapt their speaking style to “fit in”, since involuntary deviation from linguistic or procedural norms (by newcomers) undermines one’s political credibility and influence. Ultimately, mastering Parliamentish – and knowing when “going off-track” is tolerated – is essential for status, power, and effective participation in a consensus-democracy’s parliamentary life.

2.2 *Language and Self-Positioning*

So, to become a legitimate politician, one needs to know and speak the language of politics. This holds true not least for the language to be used in parliamentary debates. It is only once politicians have mastered “Parliamentish” that they may start intentionally breaking parliamentary rules, for instance by occasionally cracking a joke instead of chairing the meeting in strict sobriety, as exemplified by President Prelicz in Schwyz towards the end of his presidential year (see examples A, B and C above).

As illustrated by the examples of humorous unscripted instances provided in this paper, humour can be used purposely in parliament in order to push and promote one’s political persona. Wittiness helps MPs to present themselves as funny – both to their peers and the public – and thus gain symbolic capital. By positioning themselves as someone quick-witted, funny and thus congenial, politicians are also likely to strengthen their authenticity. According to Luebke (2021), performed, mediated and perceived political authenticity comprises four dimensions: consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy. Immediacy is associated with liveness, spontaneity and emotions. Being able to make an unexpected witty joke during a formalized live debate may thus be positively perceived by others, and therefore strengthen a politician’s authenticity – and thus his or her chances of gaining symbolic capital in the form of peer or party support or by being re-elected in the future.

Thus, humour and wit help to advance one’s personal political career. Moreover, they may be used as a rhetorical means for persuasion, for instance by exaggerating (see the above “crocodile” example during the “wolf debate”). Thus, humour may be a useful element – among other things such as social media, positive media coverage or frequent political initiatives – in successfully constructing and maintaining one’s political persona (cf. Lucius-Hoehne/Deppermann 2004 on narrative identity and positioning).

2.3 *Language and Consensus*

But a specific language may not only be beneficial to the individual, but also with regard to the social dimension of (cantonal) parliaments. After all, politics is language in action. In other words: Language is the most important tool in politics. Most political action depends on verbal and non-verbal communication. So, language is crucial for every political system and culture. Using a formal, factual, polite language is a prerequisite for a cooperative debate.

Attacking other MPs personally, in contrast, nurtures an atmosphere of affective polarisation detrimental to consensus-oriented political collaboration. This is often the case for

topics that are close to the MPs' heart, or in other words: content that is debated with great fervour, personal or emotional involvement or even occasional aggressivity. Examples of such emotionally or ideologically loaded subject matters include financial questions (taxes, salaries, infrastructure), health topics, migration and the wolf issue. As we witnessed on different occasions during our visits, with such sensitive topics, it may happen that the atmosphere in the parliament becomes very tense, emotional and even aggressive – or in other words: disrespectful, impolite, antagonistic and even hostile, threatening a consensus-based political discussion.

In such tense situations, the humour often accompanying unscripted instances may restore a certain degree of cooperation, social cohesion and tolerance among the MPs as fellow politicians and citizens. Laughing together about an unexpected joke may not only strengthen the sense of community of a parliament but also help to ease the tense atmosphere built up during an emotional debate. This can be seen with the “public transportation” example (D) quoted above. The joke “we need more public transportation”, playing on the MPs well-known recurrent political requests for a better public transportation system, immediately eased the uncomfortably tense atmosphere. With the entire room erupting in laughter, the witty remark by the female SP politician managed to tear down the tower of resentment that had been built up by the previous ardent discussion.

In the end, the vote for or against the educational program under discussion remained regionally polarised. But at least the spiteful atmosphere in the parliamentary chamber had been retransformed into one of mutual respect and professional political collaboration in the interest of the canton of Schwyz. Such civility is crucial for MPs to politically work together across party-lines, be it in meetings, in committees or in other contexts. In that respect, unscripted spontaneous moments of humour may at times even be crucial to get MPs and parliaments back on track towards a consensus-based political behaviour.

E) Conclusion

Taking the examples of the cantons of Neuchâtel and Schwyz, this working paper shows how highly controlled, tightly structured sittings of cantonal parliaments proceed in general, and how they may at times get off track. After describing the “default mode” of normally very formal, highly controlled parliamentary debates in section B, section C looked at so-called unscripted instances, i.e. spontaneous deviations from regular proceedings (e.g. lengthy detours or short funny remarks, see examples A-H above). For instance, presidents may make a mistake in the procedure, or MPs may choose to deviate from their pre-prepared script by spontaneously inserting a joke. Section D offers two interpretative perspectives:

From a sociological point of view, we observed how moments of disruption during parliamentary debates constitute variations within an institutional framework. MPs occasionally play with the official frame by challenging, circumventing or even mocking it, or, conversely, by allowing themselves to break with it temporarily. In doing so, the highly formalised and controlled nature of parliamentary sessions gets off track, and/or initial

agreements or compromises reached in the committee⁹ prior to the sitting are seemingly put at risk. However, even after such spontaneous deviations, debates are always reoriented back to the institutionalised framework, and thus, ultimately, towards consensus. Therefore, unscripted instances in parliament are part of the formal debates or institutionalised conflicts in Swiss consensus-oriented democracy. Consensus-democracy is achieved in many ways. Strong institutionalisation and ritualisation is one of them. Yet it is precisely the micro-incidents, deviations, and emotions that make this ritual visible. Without these moments, consensus between MPs would remain invisible, taken for granted. With them, we can see the interactional work needed to maintain it.

From a linguistic perspective, we observed how MPs first need to know the language of parliament, which we call *Parliamentish*, in order to be able to play with it or break its rules. The gradual acquisition of this very specific language variety and the formal proceedings accompanying it allows speakers to partially emancipate themselves from the strict framework. Only its mastery enables intentional moments of disruption such as jokes and witty remarks. Such spontaneous instances of humour may on the one hand serve the MP's personal goals, such as self-positioning and career advancement by promoting one's persona and party. On the other, unscripted instances can foster a sense of community and a political culture of cooperation, within which different opinions can be expressed and must be acknowledged (cf. Bühlmann's (2022) "institutionalised obligation for dialogue"). For instance, during emotionally polarised debates, witty remarks may ease a tense atmosphere, which in turn may foster the MPs' willingness to (back-stage) constructively discuss and to find compromises across party-lines.

To conclude, we claim that off-track moments such as the ones discussed in this paper may shed light on how the cooperation-based political system and culture of Switzerland function and how they are constantly co-constructed, (re-)negotiated, maintained, and updated by their users – not least by MPs whose behaviour and language briefly depart from the highly orchestrated agenda of cantonal parliaments. In short, not only institutionalised parliamentary debates, but also their occasional off-track moments and unscripted instances contribute to strengthening the traditional consensus-democratic idea – or ideal – of Swiss politics.

⁹ We are indebted to a reviewer's comment on the relevance of the temporal aspect: Depending on the topic, parliamentary debates can initially be more conflict-oriented, e.g. to foster distinction and profile building. As the vote approaches and parties work toward consensus positions, language and behaviour often become more conciliatory.

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