

# Research and politics: a multi-faceted synergy

BACKGROUND



# Both behind the scenes and in front of the microphone, ETH researchers play various different roles when it comes to politics. We look at two of them in more depth.

**“Scientific evidence never gives you just one clear course of action. In the end, it’s up to the politicians to decide which one to take.”**

Where will our power come from in future? What does the war in Ukraine mean for Switzerland’s security policy? And what impact will artificial intelligence have on the economy? It’s up to politicians to develop solutions to these and many other challenges. To do this successfully, they rely on input from the scientific community.

Many researchers from ETH Zurich regularly share their knowledge with representatives from politics and the administration, providing data, calculating scenarios, explaining correlations, evaluating suggested solutions and warning about dangers. This communication takes various different forms and can include task forces, committees and parliamentary hearings as well as consultation sessions and public lectures.

The role taken on by researchers depends very much on the matter in hand, but also has a lot to do with their personality. Often, they work away silently, unnoticed in the background, but sometimes they use media coverage to draw attention to problems.

## **Behind the scenes**

When Russian troops invaded Ukraine in February 2022, experts from the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich appeared in the media on an almost daily basis to analyse the dramatic events. However, away from the media spotlight and the public eye, researchers still had their hands full: “We supported federal councillors, members of parliament and leading executives in the Swiss Federal Administration with re-

gard to placing the consequences of the war in the context of Swiss security policy,” explains Andreas Wenger.

Wenger is a professor of security policy at ETH and has been Director of the CSS since 2002. His institute fulfils official mandates for the Swiss Federal Departments of Defence and Foreign Affairs. The ETH professor engages in constant and institutionalised dialogue with Swiss politicians and the administration. He regularly meets with the people he advises and has known most of them for years. “Scientific policy advice requires mutual trust, a respect for one another’s expertise and an understanding of the allocation of roles between the worlds of politics and science,” he explains.

Politicians need to be aware that scientific results are never set in stone and that researchers also contradict one another. Scientists, for their part, need to understand that political decision-makers usually use knowledge strategically to resolve conflicts of interest and values within society: “In politics, knowledge is a means to an end. There is consequently always a risk that research results will be exploited to serve a specific agenda,” says Wenger. So how does he deal with this?

“A lot of what we do takes place at a very early stage of the legislative process, when the ball is in the administration’s court and the issues have not yet been really politicised. They are more open to scientific input at this stage,” explains the professor of security policy. Once politicians establish a firm

position on a matter or if a question cannot be answered in scientific terms, then there's less scope for his colleagues to make substantial contributions. "In such cases, we have rejected commissions for studies or consultation in the past," says Wenger.

### In the media spotlight

ETH climate scientist Reto Knutti takes on a very different role when it comes to politics. In April, he joined more than 250 other researchers to speak out in favour of the Swiss Climate Protection Act in a public statement, on social media and in numerous interviews. By doing so, he

got involved in the legislative process at a time that couldn't be more politicised and emotionally charged – during the referendum campaign.

But the ETH professor is not naive. He is aware that his involvement carries some risks: "Of course, a minority of people no longer consider me to be a disinterested observer. The price of silence, however, is much higher – not only for the planet and society but also for the precious role that facts and science play in political and media debate."

Knutti believes that he has a duty to get involved in referendums where scientific questions play a key role. It is vital that researchers base their assess-

ment of political bills first and foremost on scientific facts. What's more, they should be transparent about their interests and the reason for their stance, and also be open to discussing other opinions. "Researchers must employ their expertise to determine what is true and what is not. If we fail to do this, other actors with vested interests will proffer their own interpretations," explains the climate physicist.

### When will ETH adopt a position?

Unlike some of its researchers, ETH Zurich does not publicly adopt a position on political bills unless they affect research policy. "If it's to do with the underlying conditions for education, research and knowledge sharing, ETH will stand up for its interests in Bern," says Norbert Staub, who works in the Office of the ETH President and is responsible for the university's political relations. As well as liaising with key politicians, his role involves organising information events for delegations from parliament.

Sometimes, however, his work goes beyond the limits of the Swiss parliament: together with partners from the ETH Domain and the UK higher education sector, he has led a campaign for Switzerland to become fully associated to the Horizon Europe research programme. Various ETH researchers also publicly support this issue on a regular basis.



### In the end, it's down to the politicians

"At ETH Zurich, there's room for differentiated roles. Researchers are given freedom on both an academic and personal level and have the right to express their opinion on political bills," explains Benedikt Knüsel. The ETH alumnus is the main point of contact at ETH Zurich for representatives from politics and the administration as well as researchers with an interest in scientific policy advice. Knüsel coordinates the numerous activities carried out by ETH researchers in the political sphere and develops new platforms for dialogue with political decision-makers. He is also currently compiling a guide that aims to support researchers in dealing with politicians.

Benedikt Knüsel encourages researchers to apply their expertise to political matters in their subject area. He recommends that they engage with the political requirements in question and use their specialist knowledge to identify different courses of action and to appraise them without clearly advocating one specific option. "Scientific evidence never gives you just one clear course of action. In the end, it's up to the politicians to decide which one to take."



#### Politics workshop in November

ETH researchers can take various roles in the political discourse – and they can learn what this means in practice in a one-day politics workshop being held by Benedikt Knüsel and Corporate Communications on 17 November as part of the Communication Academy. [www.ethz.ch/communication-academy-en](http://www.ethz.ch/communication-academy-en)