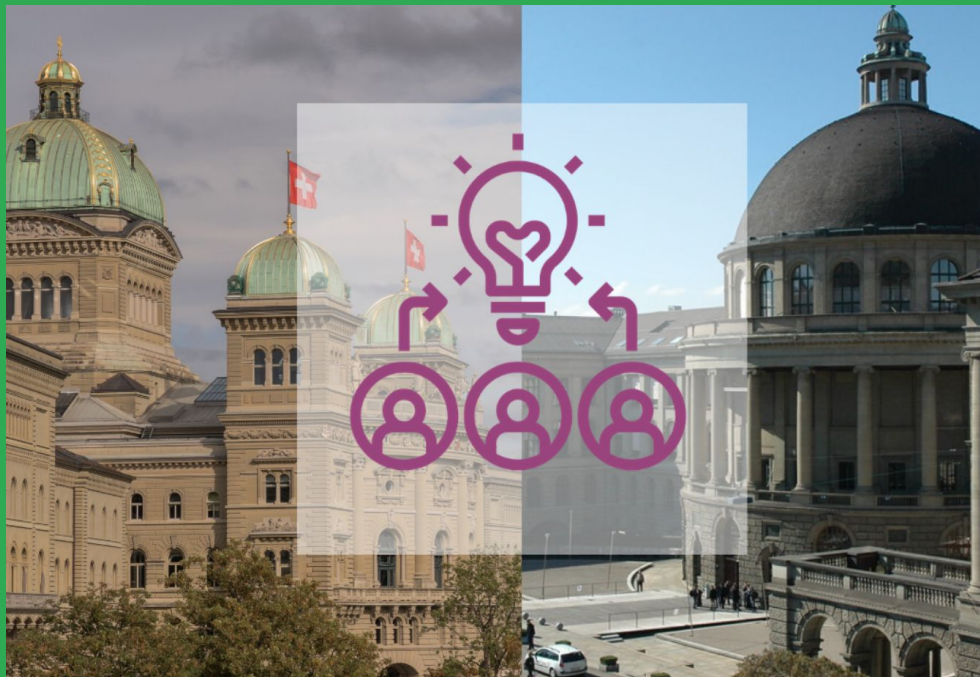


How to Engage with the Public and Politics as Scientists

Andreas Stoller (University of Fribourg) and Janik Mutter (Reatch)
SSPH+ Annual Meeting – 24.06.2026

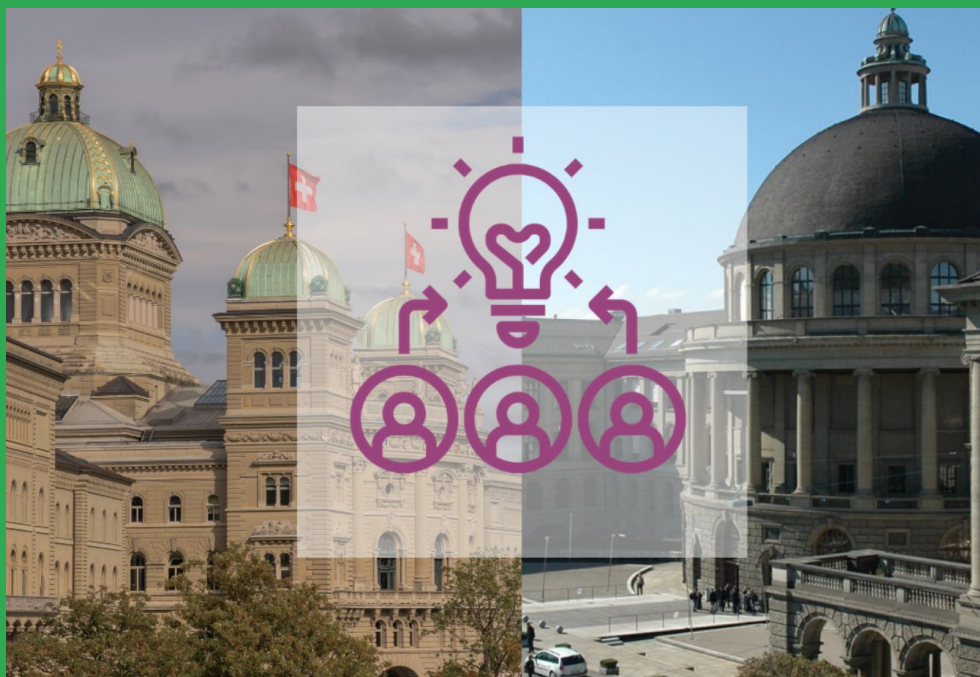
Making the Case for Science

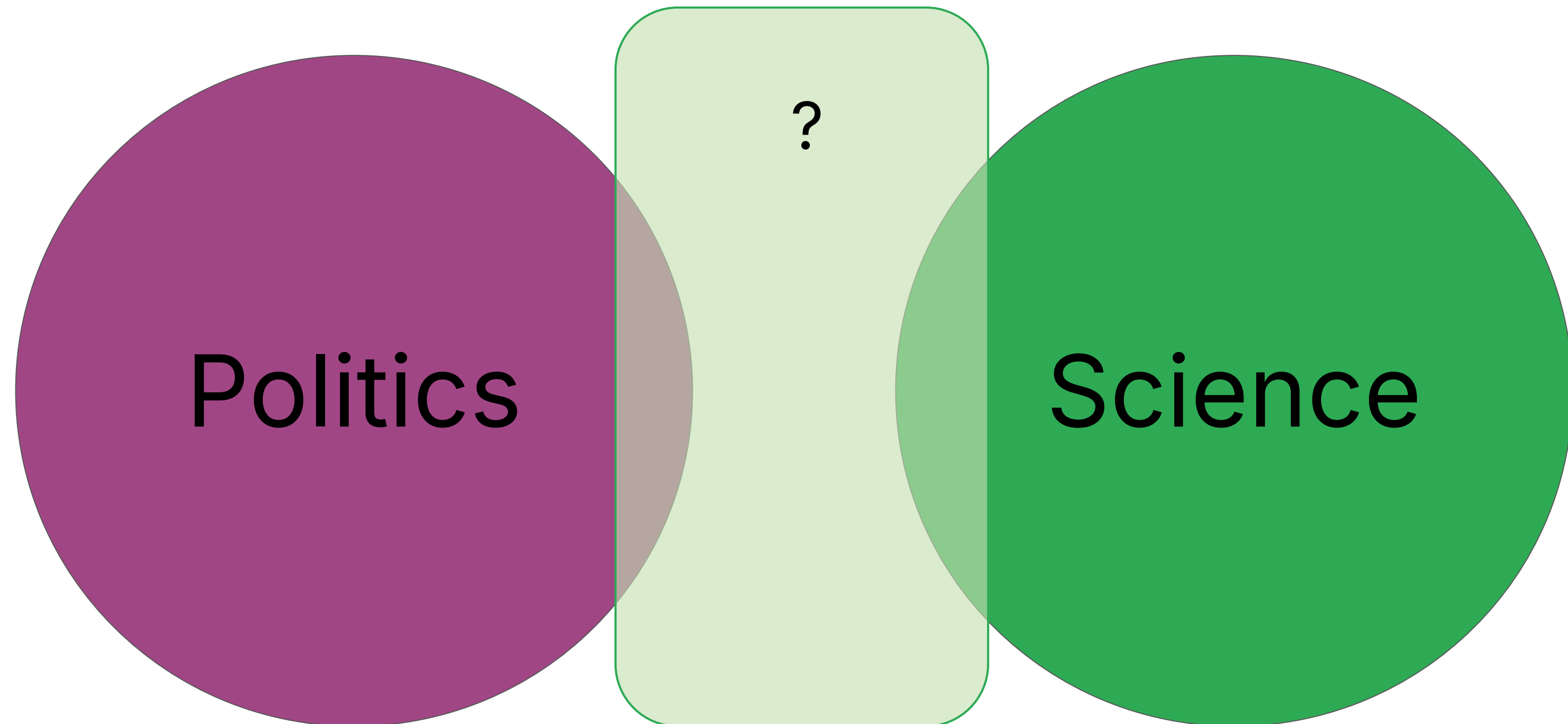


- Financial pressure is increasing, while expectations for societal and policy impact are rising
- Academic careers are shaped by publication pressure and uncertainty, leaving little time and incentives for such work
- This creates a tension between financial resources, public expectations, and academic incentives
- Today, we will explore how you, as scientists, can make the case for your work — and for science as a whole

Goals

- Understand the **fundamental roles of science and politics**, and reflect on your **own role** within this relationship
- Explore ways **how to engage** with the public and policymakers, and **contribute to political processes**
- Identify **key actors** and learn how to **communicate effectively** with political stakeholders





Democratic Politics vs. Science

Common Ground:

- **Rule-based processes:** Results are accepted if they have been achieved using established procedures.
- **Pluralistic cultures:** The diversity of interests, practices and positions is valued as a strength of the system; uniformity is the exception, not the rule.
- Trust in/belief in **open debate, collective intelligence** and **shared power**

Democratic politics:

- Exercising power by creating majorities: **«what-should-be-questions»**
- Main forms of conflict: **Diverging interests** and **conflicting values**
- Predominant forms of conflict resolution: **Compromise, vote, Election**

Sciences:

- Progress in knowledge through cooperation and competition: **«what-is-questions»**
- Main forms of conflict: **Conflicting knowledge claims** and **priority disputes**
- Predominant forms of conflict resolution: **Validation, falsification, consensus**

Science and Policy



Politics and
Administration

Framework conditions and
resources for research

«Policy for Science»

«Science for Policy»

Evidence and expertise from
research



Higher Education and
Research Institutions

Science and Policy



Politics and
Administration

SERI (ERI Dispatch); [EU / EHEA etc.]

Framework conditions and
resources for research

«Policy for Science»



Higher Education and
Research Institutions

Primarily by institutional actors:
swissuniversities, SNSF, Higher
Education and Research Institutions
themselves

Science and Policy



Politics and
Administration

Evidence and expertise from
research



«Science for Policy»

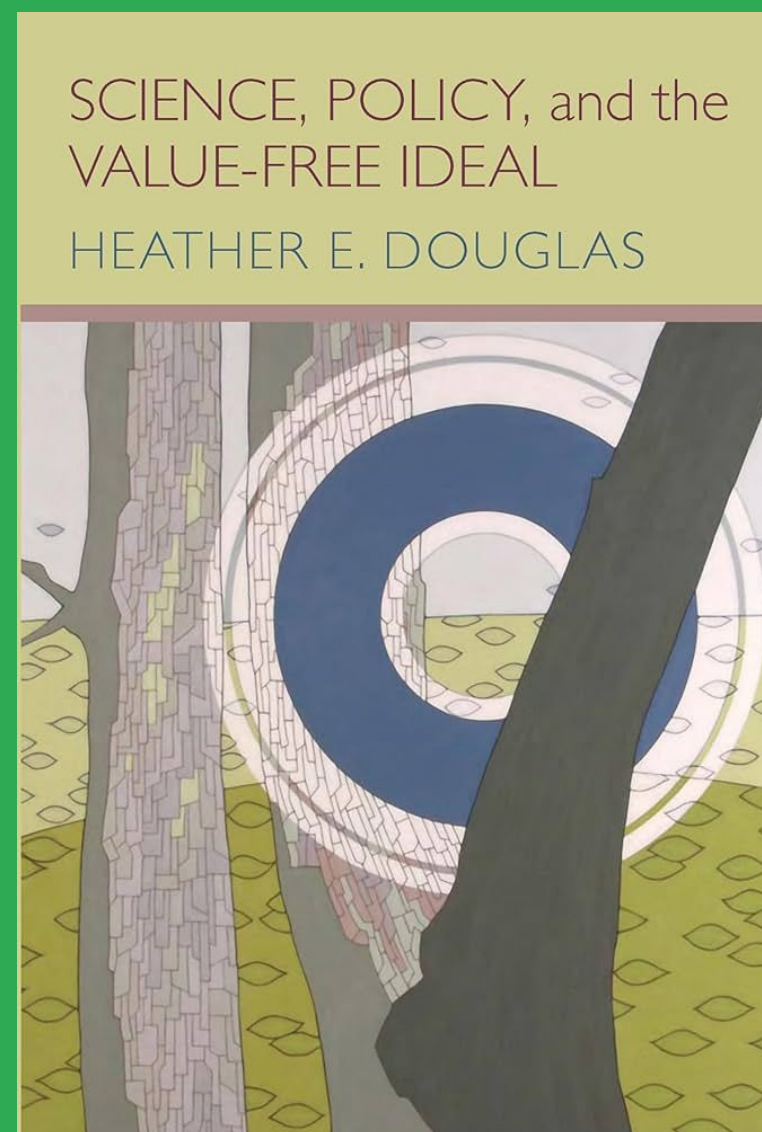


Higher Education and
Research Institutions

Evidence (knowledge and research results from studies): **Present in the legislative/executive context**, a central basis for political decisions - *but not the only one!*

Expertise (person-specific, specialised, in-depth knowledge): **Only partially standardised in the legislative/executive context**, personal contacts central. Direct contact: Building trust and relationships → *privileged position of researchers in the context of democracy!*

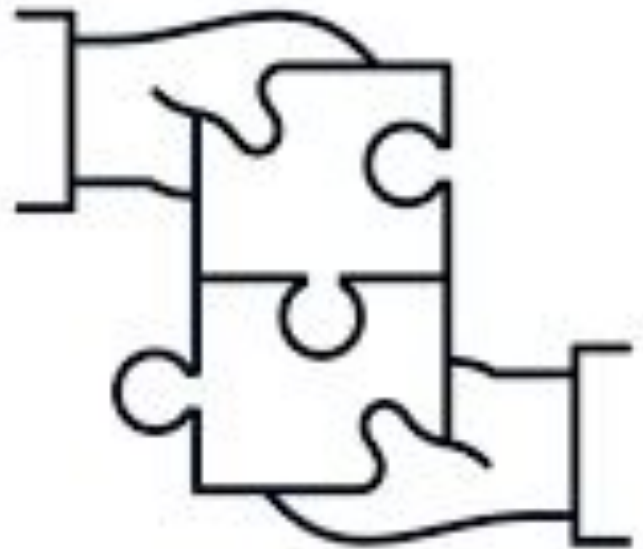
Heather Douglas



«Science cannot tell us what we should do – it provides the best empirical claims available with which to make decisions, but it cannot provide the normative claims with which to proceed.»

Experts in Democracy (Lisa Herzog)

How can expertise be brought into democratic politics without undermining democratic values?



- **The interaction between expert groups and democratic politics must be approached consciously, with respect and care.**
- **Trust is fundamental.**
- **Partnership Model** (in functioning democracies)

Pure Scientist

- Focuses on research not its use
- Provides knowledge so decision makers can use it
- Has no direct connection with decision makers

Issue Advocate

- Focuses on implications of research for a particular political agenda
- Aligns with a group which advances its interests through policy and politics
- Engages with decision making process
- Seeks to reduce the scope of decision choice

Science Arbiter

- Stays removed from policy and politics
- Provides expert advice to decision makers
- Only provides scientific input
- Does not interact with stakeholders

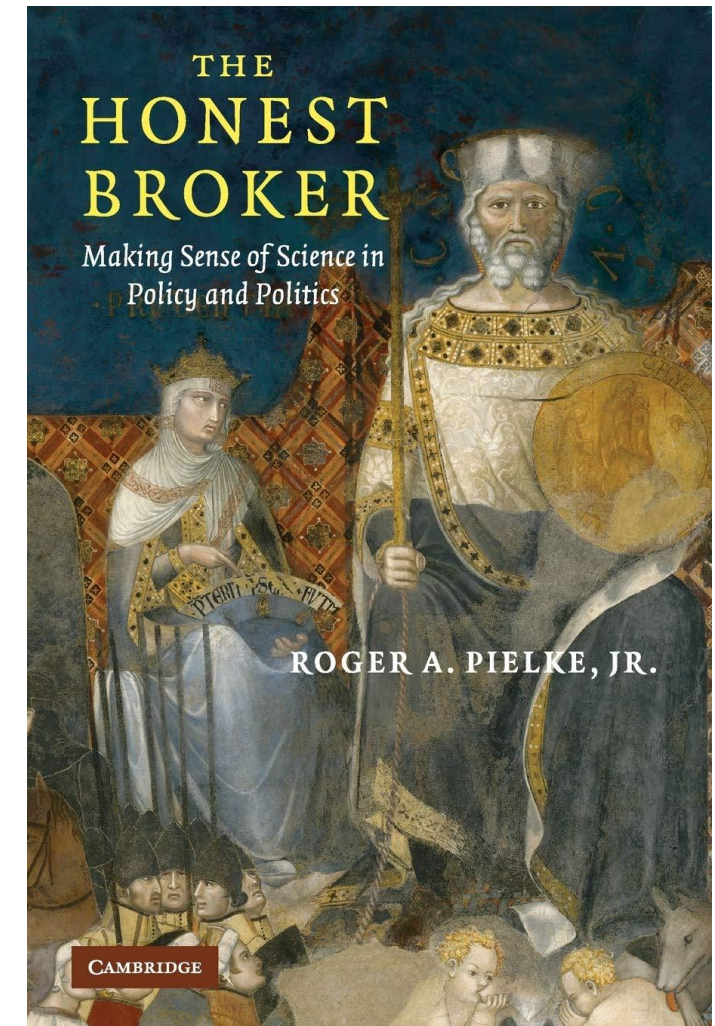
Honest broker

- Integrates scientific knowledge with stakeholder concerns to identify/inform decision options
- Places scientific understanding in the context of decision options
- Seeks to expand the scope of decision choice

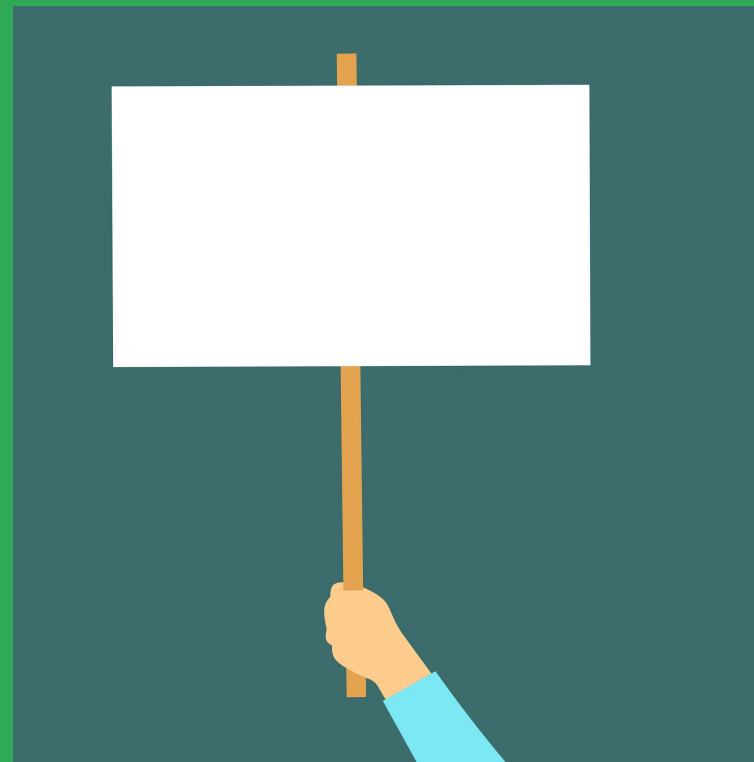
LOW

Level of engagement with stakeholders and decision process

HIGH



The Role of «Issue Advocate»

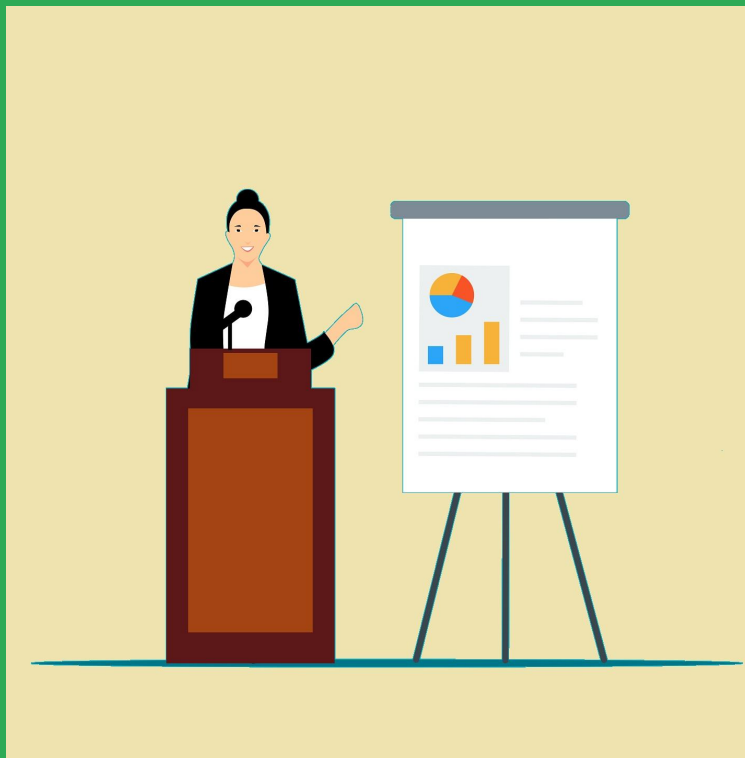


Advocating for a
specific policy solution
with recourse to field of
scientific expertise

- Issues can be **actively placed on the political agenda** with potentially greater influence on policy decisions
- Well suited to **draw attention to issues** that are neglected
- Often aligned with certain segments of society/of the political spectrum: High level of trust among **like-minded political actors**
- Often **active on several stages at the same time** (media, advisory committees, political rallies etc.)
- Attractive for **media coverage**

BUT: Commitment to a specific policy solution means greater exposure and risks association with a specific political agenda

The Role of «Honest Broker»

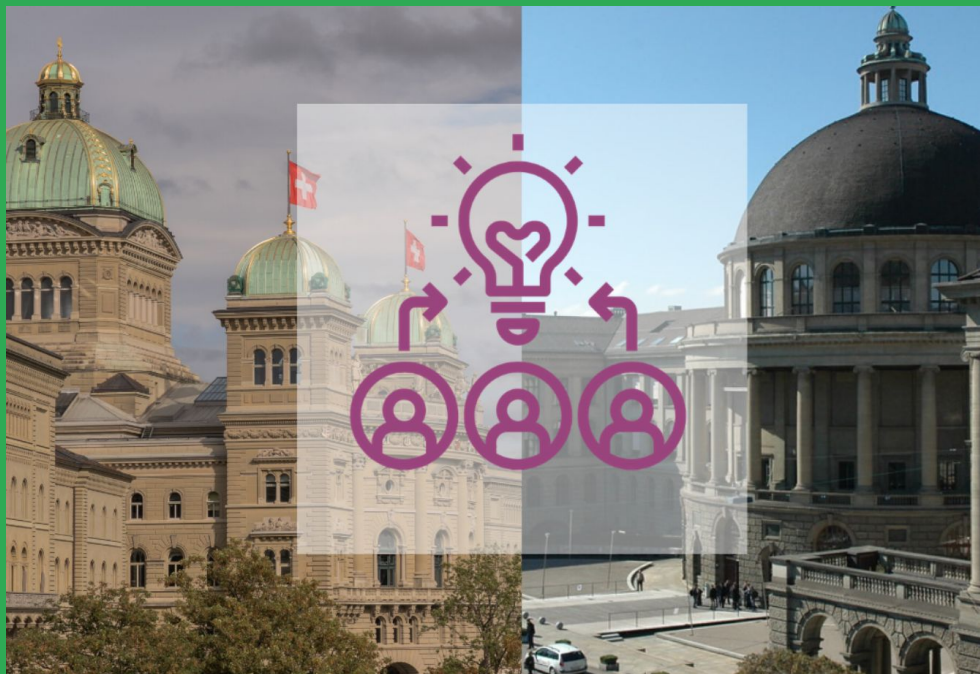


**Policy-relevant but not
policy-prescriptive
with recourse to field of
scientific expertise**

- **Outline different policy options/scenarios**, provide current state of certainty/uncertainty, highlight value implications of findings
- **Decision-making options in complex situations** are made transparent on a scientific basis
- **Neutral position regarding political decisions** creates credibility and enables long-term cooperation with all political actors
- **Better protection against political instrumentalisation:**
Democratically elected representatives are less able to shift responsibility for decisions to scientific experts.

BUT: Hardly any active influence on the political agenda or concrete political decisions

Short exchange (5 min)



- Did you ever interact with public or policy makers?
- Could you say which of these roles you took?

The Path of Evidence into Policy Making (Naomi Oreskes)

WHY
TRUST
SCIENCE
?
NAOMI
ORESKEs

- Most major (publicly known) scientific «breakthroughs» **reach the public through social discourses** (and thus in political/religious/societal/economic, etc. contexts) and with respective framings
- Science is done in **context(s), social construction of scientific knowledge**

«We need to speak for the facts because the facts don't speak for themselves.»

But how to speak for the facts and getting heard? (Silvia Maier)

« Whether communication is successful or not is determined by the recipient — not the sender. »

- Favorite move of academics: «We just have to argue our cause better, then they will surely understand»
- Academics like to lecture, which implies authority, but also creates a power imbalance (power conscious audience)
 - **Creating a dialogue on eye level** can help with both
 - **Curiosity and appreciation** for the position, role and perspective of the other side is really productive

Perception is an Active Process (Silvia Maier)

People hear what is relevant to them! Constructivist view of reality & «active inference»

- We perceive information always in the context of what we know & what we expect
- We think in «action plans»

Ask yourself:

- What does the other person **need to know**?
- How does it **matter to them**?
 - Relevant for their work → **What decision(s) do they need to take**
 - **Need to know vs. nice to know**
 - Know and take into account **current socio-political context, their values and beliefs**

You want to be heard? Be relevant - not prescriptive.

Communication Channels



Policy Brief: Short, concise Summary of a problem with possible solutions, includes a recommendation

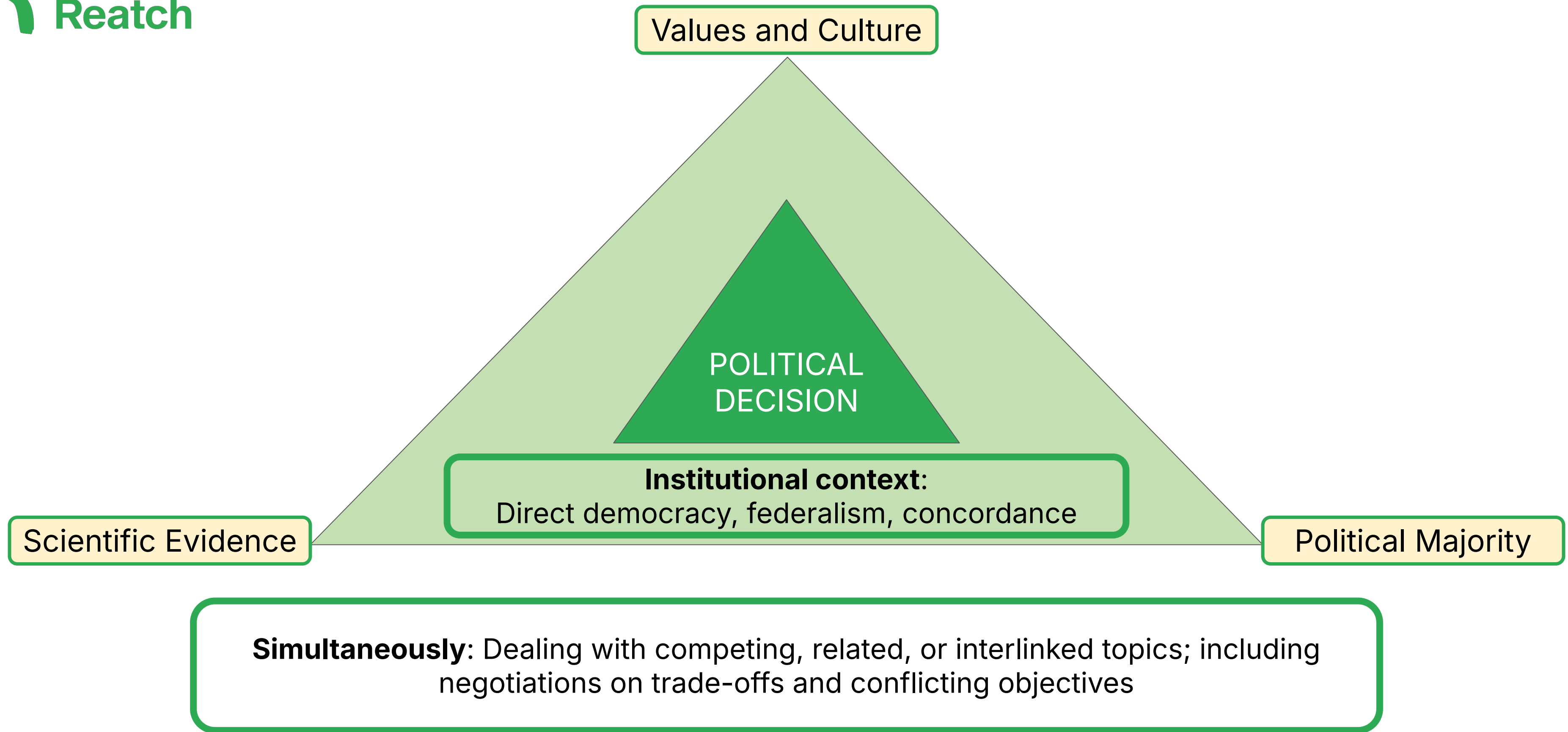
White Paper: Comprehensive report, includes analysis, background information and detailed presentation of solutions

Workshops and Meetings: Direct and personal contact and exchange with policy makers, network and trust building

Project Reporting: Report on project results/activities, often the case for departmental research, allows direct dialogue

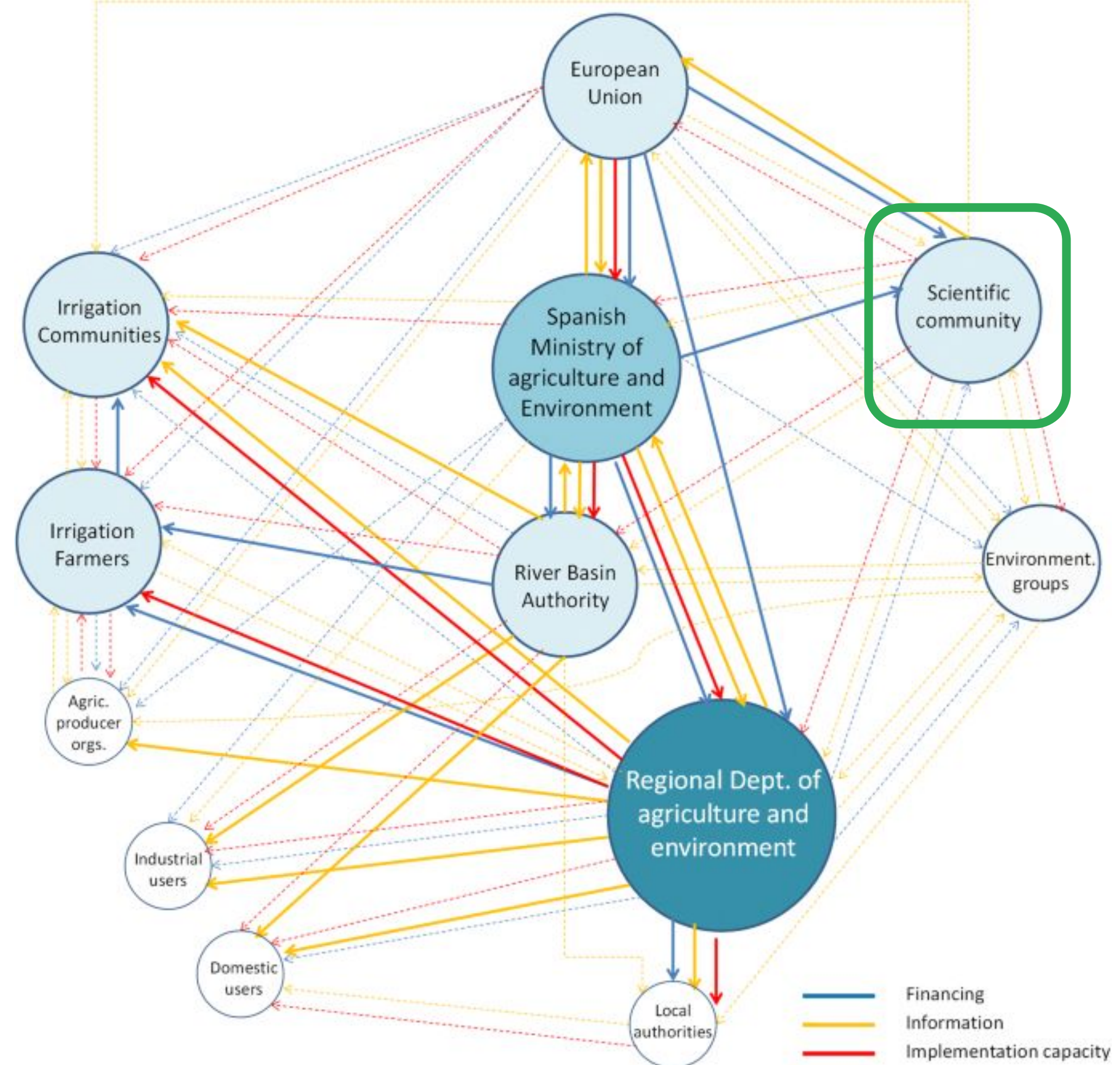
Working Groups, Commissions, etc: Network with other experts, often mandated with concrete tasks by politics

Public Consultation: Evidence sharing using the most institutionalised way, format might be similar to a brief

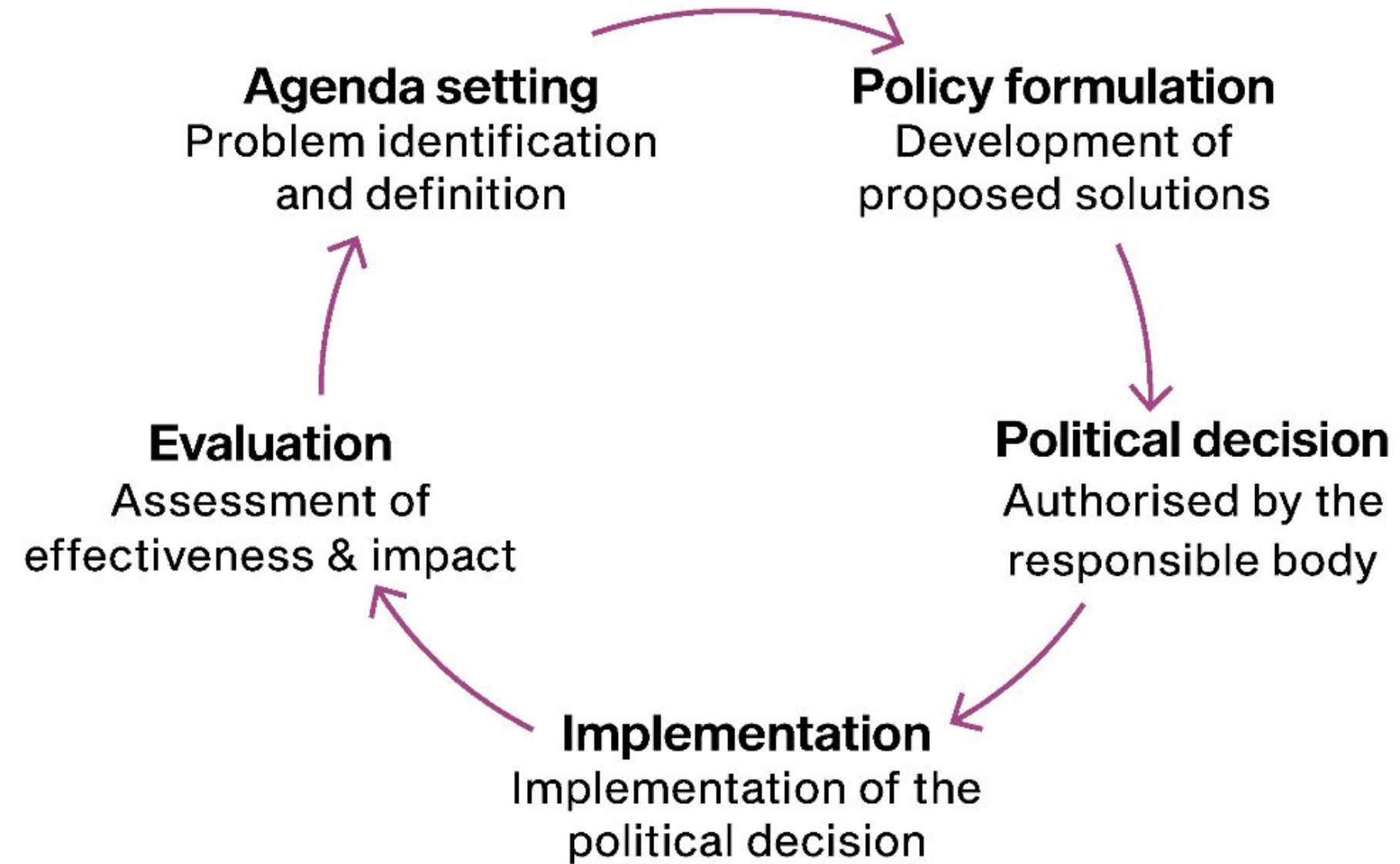


Researchers are just one of many stakeholders

Esteve, P., Varela-Ortega, C. & Downing, T.E. **A stakeholder-based assessment of barriers to climate change adaptation in a water-scarce basin in Spain.** *Reg Environ Change* **18**, 2505–2517 (2018).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-018-1366-y>



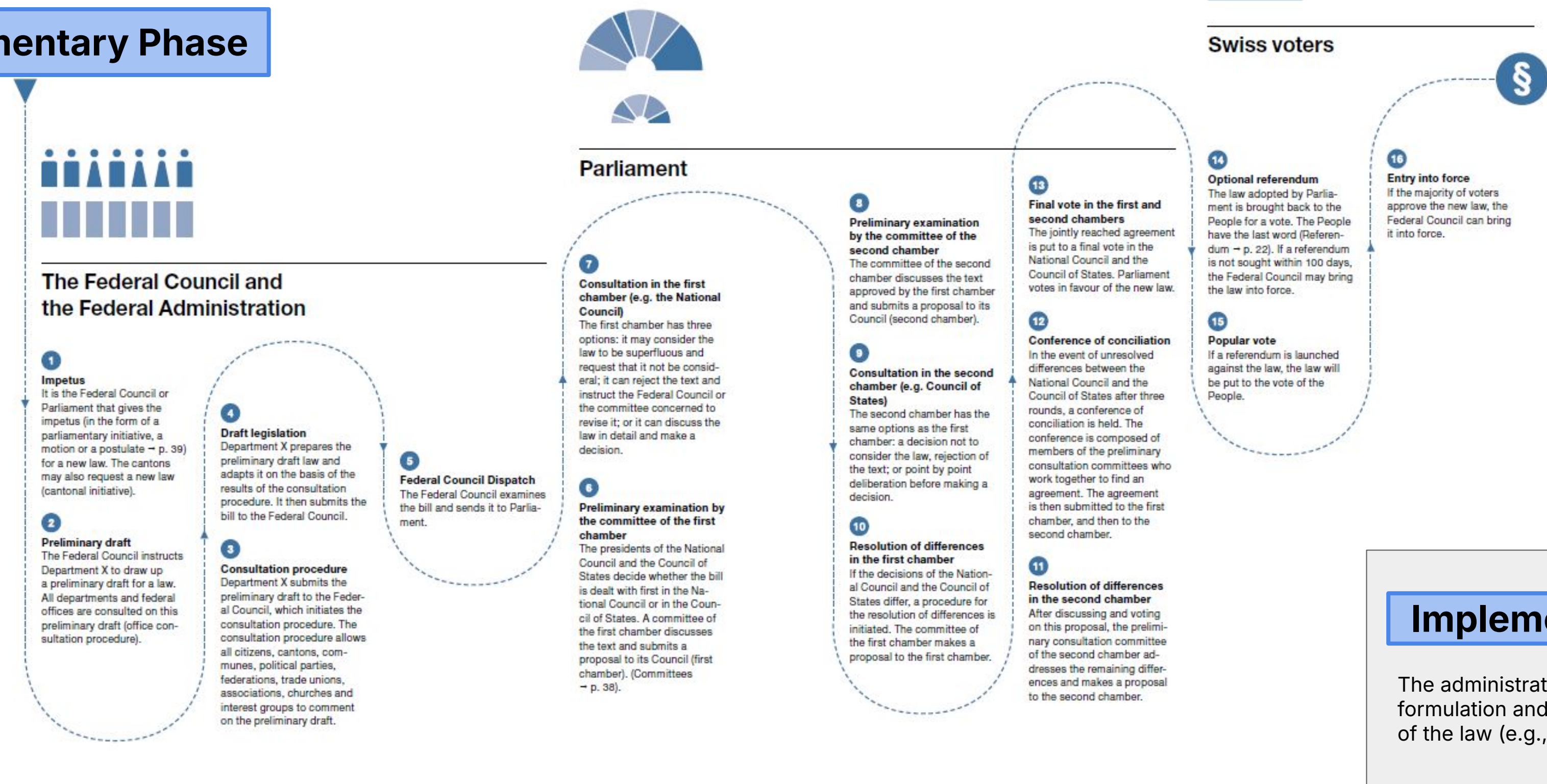
Policy Cycle



Direct-democratic Phase

Parliamentary Phase

Preparliamentary Phase



Direct-democratic Phase

Parliamentary Phase

Preparliamentary Phase



The Federal Council and the Federal Administration

Dialogue with Administration

Impetus (in the form of a parliamentary initiative, a motion or a postulate → p. 39) for a new law. The cantons may also request a new law (cantonal initiative).

2 Preliminary draft
The Federal Council instructs Department X to draw up a preliminary draft for a law. All departments and federal offices are consulted on this preliminary draft (office consultation procedure).

Draft legislation
Department X prepares the preliminary draft law and adapts it on the basis of the results of the consultation procedure. It then submits the bill to the Federal Council.

3 Consultation procedure
Department X submits the preliminary draft to the Federal Council, which initiates consultation procedure. The consultation procedure allows all citizens, cantons, communes, political parties, federations, trade unions, associations, churches and interest groups to comment on the preliminary draft.

Consultation

5 Federal Council Dispatch
The Federal Council examines the bill and sends it to Parliament.



Parliament

7 Consultation in the first chamber (e.g. the National Council)
The first chamber has three options: it may consider the law to be superfluous and request that it not be considered; it can reject the text and instruct the Federal Council or the committee concerned to revise it; or it can discuss the law in detail and make a decision.

6 Preliminary examination by the committee of the first chamber
The presidents of the National Council and the Council of States decide whether the bill is dealt with first in the National Council or in the Council of States. A committee of the first chamber discusses the text and submits a proposal to its Council (first chamber). (Committees p. 38).

8 Preliminary examination by the committee of the second chamber
The committee of the second chamber discusses the text approved by the first chamber and submits a proposal to its Council (second chamber).

9 Consultation in the second chamber (e.g. Council of States)
The second chamber has the

Committee Hearing

10 Resolution of differences in the first chamber
If the decisions of the National Council and the Council of States differ, a procedure for the resolution of differences is initiated. The committee of the first chamber makes a proposal to the first chamber.

13 Final vote in the first and second chambers
The jointly reached agreement is put to a final vote in the National Council and the Council of States. Parliament votes in favour of the new law.

12 Conference of conciliation
In the event of unresolved differences between the National Council and the Council of States after three rounds, a conference of conciliation is held. The conference is composed of members of the preliminary committee of the first chamber and members of the preliminary committee of the second chamber. The agreement reached is then submitted to the first chamber, and then to the second chamber.

11 Resolution of differences in the second chamber
After discussing and voting on this proposal, the preliminary consultation committee of the second chamber addresses the remaining differences and makes a proposal to the second chamber.



Swiss voters

Referendum

14 Option referendum
The law is put to a vote. People have the right to demand a referendum. If a referendum is not sought within 100 days, the Federal Council may bring the law into force.

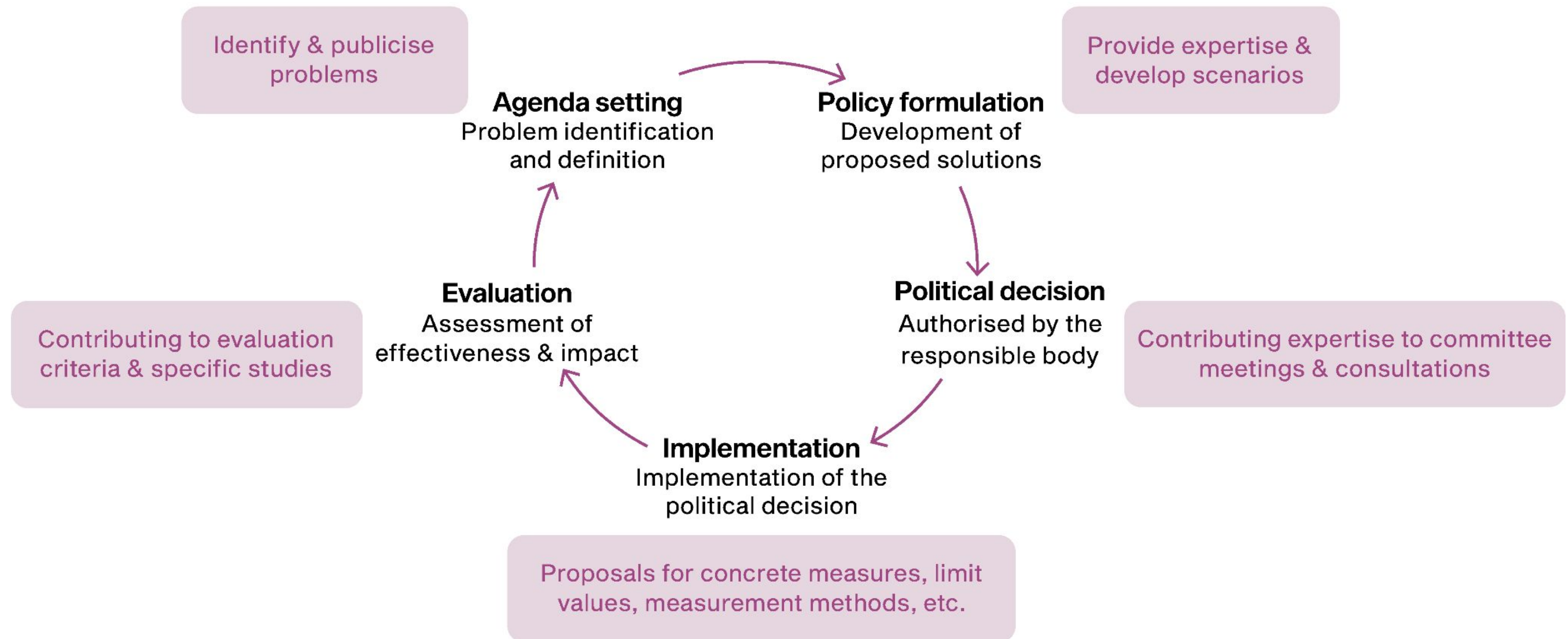
15 Popular vote
If a referendum is launched against the law, the law will be put to the vote of the People.

Implementation

The administration's formulation and implementation of the law (e.g., ordinances)

Dialogue with Administration

Policy-Engagement for Researchers



Science-Policy Ecosystem in Switzerland

Important actors in the field of Education, Research, Innovation (ERI)

- State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)
- Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (EDK)
- Swissuniversities
- ETH-Domain
- Higher Education and Research Institutions
- Swiss National Science Foundation
- Innosuisse
- **Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences**
- **Swiss Science Council**
- **National Science Advice Network**

Find Support

Within one of the intermediaries!

Or at your own institution:

- Communication office
 - Staff/unit/officer for policy/politics/society/outreach
 - Dean's office/faculty
 - Colleagues
- if available: fact sheets and guidelines

Civil society actors:

- Reatch, Staatslabor, CH++, Expedition Zukunft
- Thematic: [Public Health Switzerland](#), AlgorithmWatch, Stiftung Risiko-Dialog,

But: Choose with care – pay attention to political positioning

Reatch

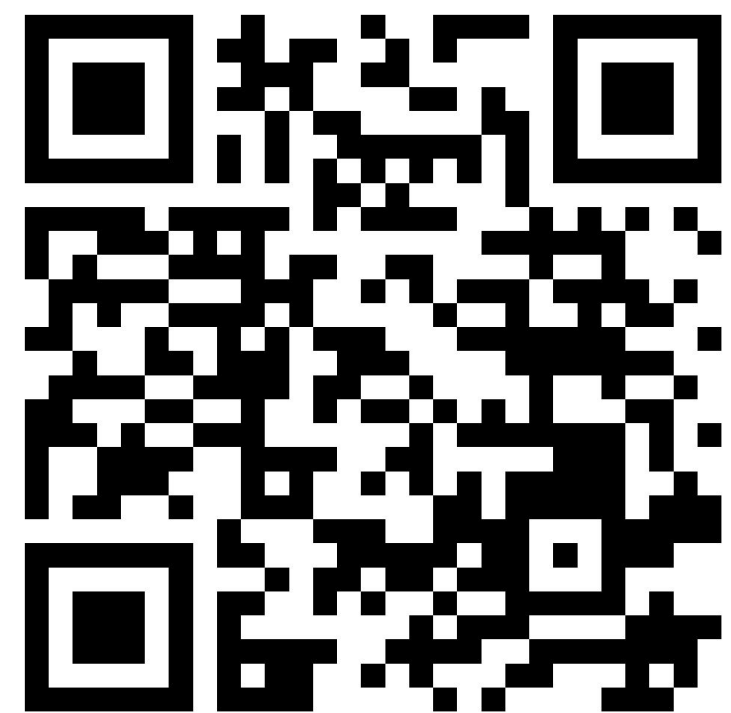


Reatch has been acting as an independent bridge builder at the interface between science and democracy for over ten years.

We create the conditions for scientific findings and expertise to be productively and responsibly incorporated into decision-making processes, broadening perspectives and enabling new approaches for tackling societal challenges.

What Else?

Sign up for the Reatch Newsletter:



<https://reatch.ch/franxini>



Coaching



Dialogue



Further Education

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