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*International Review of Administrative Sciences* 2014 80: 687

DOI: 10.1177/0020852314533452

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# The slow transformation of Swiss federal administrative elites

**Yves Emery**

IDHEAP, Université de Lausanne, Switzerland

**David Giauque**

Institut d'études politiques et internationales, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

**Frédéric Rebmann**

Université de Lausanne, Switzerland

International Review of

Administrative Sciences

2014, Vol. 80(4) 687–708

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DOI: 10.1177/0020852314533452

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## Abstract

This article sets out to study the profile of Swiss administrative elites at federal level by showing how their profile has evolved in the light of what has come to be known as the wave of New Public Management (NPM), which has benefited from a very fertile ground in Switzerland. These elites correspond to a specific institutional order, in relation to specific organizational structures and workings, and have specific characteristics in terms of career paths and academic background. However, the administrative reforms that have been rolled out since the 1980s have transformed the institutional order within which executives of the federal administration evolve. This article analyses the extent to which these transformations have had an impact on the characteristics of these elites, through indicators such as academic capital, social capital, and career path within and outside the administration. The results show a slow but significant transformation in the profiles of these elites towards an increasing managerialization, reflecting that of the context in which they evolve.

## Points for practitioners

The relationship between politics and the administration is naturally shaped by individuals but is closely dependent on the profiles of the players. They are currently undergoing a transformation in the wake of administrative reforms, and also of the changing profiles of both the political and administrative players. Gaining an insight into the slow transformation of the profiles of administrative elites therefore sheds light on the political-administrative nexus. The gradual managerialization of the administrative elite

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## Corresponding author:

Yves Emery, Professeur à l'Institut de hautes études en administration publique (IDHEAP), quartier Mouline, 1015 Lausanne, Lausanne 1015, Switzerland.

Email: Yves.Emery@unil.ch

highlighted in this article also allows for a better understanding of which professional experiences, qualifications and skills are valued today within the senior civil service in Switzerland.

### Keywords

administrative elites, professionalism/professions, public sector reform

## Introduction

Administrative elites at the federal, cantonal and, to a lesser extent, communal level have only rarely been the subject of recent studies in Switzerland. The few studies relating specifically to Swiss administrative elites have focused on the senior civil service of the federal administration (Klöti, 1972; Roth, 1994), more rarely on the Confederation *and* the Cantons (Urio, 1989), which in this latter case affects a population of about 1200 people. Senior executives are known in Swiss administrative practice by various names such as senior civil servants,<sup>1</sup> top executives, senior officials, but also, although more rarely, public managers (Farnham et al., 1996), a designation more commonly used in Anglo-Saxon countries. In this text, the senior executives in question hold positions that depend directly on the political authority, generally referred to as ‘chef de service’ (head of office) for the federal government, and ‘chef d’office’ (head of service) for the cantons.<sup>2</sup> These people belong to the category of administrative elites, that is to say, individuals holding positions allowing them to take decisions that are important for their organization and the people who belong to it. Of course, this concept of elite is very controversial in the literature, and definitions abound. However, taking the lead from Rouban, we will define the concept of elite in the following terms: ‘We will define here, however, an elite as a social group with a variety of resources (economic, cultural, networks of relations, etc.) that are bigger and more durable than those of other social groups, allowing it to impose an institutional order and its corresponding doctrine, which enables it in particular to define . . . what an elite is. The institutional order determines careers or career paths in the administrative or political environment. It also helps to hinge social practices around the requirements of legitimacy of a political system (the emphasis on the scientific nature of the State or the pluralism of decision-making mechanisms, etc.)’ (Rouban, 2007: 221). This definition emphasizes the fact that the notion of elite is collective, it is a group and not a few individuals. It is, of course, relative to the extent that hierarchies also exist within an elite, as all members do not occupy the same positions and do not have the same resources. It is ultimately challenged in the sense that the debate on the existence and origin of the elites is still very much alive.

The precise aim of this article is to study the characteristics of the senior executives of the federal administration that make up this federal administrative elite, by highlighting some recent developments related to what has now come to be known as *the wave of* New Public Management (NPM), which has enjoyed very fertile

ground in Switzerland (Giauque and Emery, 2008). The Swiss federal administrative elites therefore correspond to a specific institutional order, in relation to specific organizational structures and functions, and have specific characteristics in terms of career paths as well as training. This social group thus has quite durable characteristics that are related to a unique institutional environment. However, the administrative reforms that have been rolled out since the 1980s have transformed, at least in part, the institutional order within which the senior executives of the federal government evolve. It therefore seems legitimate to ask whether the current structural, organizational and managerial transformations have had an impact on the characteristics of administrative elites. By characteristics we mean in particular the academic background that puts these elites on a given career path. The aim is to investigate the type of academic background, but also to explore continuous education, which is increasingly important. It also sets out to see whether these elites come from the administrative fold or another background. These are precisely the objectives of the article, beyond evoking those characteristics which have been rather neglected by the research to date.

While the Anglo-Saxon countries were the first to launch managerialization initiatives during the 1980s, it was not until the following decade that the Swiss administrations followed suit. In the early 1990s, NPM took hold in Switzerland, as both the federal administration and many cantons and cities started to apply principles derived from this new way of organizing and steering public services (Lienhard et al., 2005). The NPM approach sets out at the same time to transform the senior executives into managers of *public enterprises* (Delley, 1994) with *services* to deliver to *customers*. In this universalist perspective that equates public management to management per se, the theories and methods inspired by private business management served as a central repository of both instruments and values on which to draw to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the managed services. Besides the public management tools related to the definition and steering of services, to their organization and financial management, NPM served to bring about a far-reaching transformation in the processes and tools of public HRM (Desmarais et al., 2007). Among the most significant changes (Emery and Giauque, 2012), we can mention strengthening of workforce planning and skills, recruitment processes making more systematic use of validated evaluation tools, especially the assessment of senior executives, and the development of training processes making it possible to upgrade the level of competences of existing staff with suggested or mandatory training courses for middle managers and senior executives.

This led to particular emphasis being placed on performance management at all levels of the hierarchy, which implies a clearer definition of responsibilities, the setting of objectives, a performance evaluation system and, as is now common in the Swiss civil service, a system of financial incentives (performance-related pay, in force since 2003 in the federal administration). For senior executives in particular, these changes have had a significant impact, first at the political level (Schmidt, 2007), especially in clarifying the aims and objectives of the public policies

implemented, and as regards the working processes of public administration. These methods imply that senior executives have mastered new skills in keeping with managerialization.

Numerous evaluations, in Switzerland and internationally, have made it possible to take stock of the contributions, but also and above all, of the limits of NPM, in a legal and institutional environment that remains resolutely public (Schmidt, 2007; Meier and O'Toole, 2009). However, there is still a distinct lack of studies on the impact of these reforms on the administrative elite; hence the importance of this article. To do this, we will make use of a theoretical framework that is particularly relevant in the Swiss political and administrative environment: the institutional framework and the path dependency it generates will be highlighted by the neo-institutional approach, as a reading grid of the changes that characterize Switzerland's senior civil service and in particular the characteristics of the senior executives in the public sector.

In light of the theoretical framework developed in the following section, this article discusses the Swiss institutional features, including those relating to the federal government, the best documented level and on which we will focus for our analysis. In a second step, we present the salient features of the senior civil service in Switzerland, which will allow us to highlight the recent progressive changes that partly explain the emergence of new characteristics among Swiss administrative elites. Based on these analyses, we will set forth the main conclusions that can be reached on the evolution of these elites.

## **General theoretical perspective and research proposals**

The theoretical perspective underlying our thinking is in the framework of the reflections specific to the neo-institutional theory of organizations in its historical and sociological version (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 1995). The historical version, popular in comparative approaches to public administration in particular (Kuhlmann, 2010a), is based on the idea that the institutional changes that can be observed, especially at the political-administrative level, always develop in close conjunction with the institutional conditions that prevail and the particular history of the institutions. The structuring, the workings of the administrative apparatus, as well as reforms follow a particular path dependency that is always more or less tied to specific institutional features and the characteristics of national political systems. 'From this theoretical perspective, subsequent policy choices appear to be conditioned by "policy legacies" springing from the past' (Kuhlmann, 2010b: 1117). In this sense, comparativists have demonstrated that administrative reforms depend on the types of political regime or administrative traditions (Lodge, 2007; Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004). Thus, more decentralized federal countries, whose governments are based on the principles of inclusion and consensus, undergo incremental administrative reforms, as is the case in Switzerland, where the culture is characterized by regulatory mechanisms that prevent any radical change (Berchtold, 1989; Germann, 1996; Giauque, 2013).

The more 'sociological' version of the neo-institutional approach stresses, for its part, that there is a significant link between the environment and the organizations and that they are both a reflection of broader societal institutions within which they operate while, in turn, helping to shape these social institutions (Brint and Karabel, 1991). As noted by one of the pioneers of the neo-institutional theory, namely Selznick, organizations evolve over time into institutions. 'Institutionalization is a process. It is something that happens to an organization over time, reflecting the organization's own distinctive history, the people who have been in it, the groups it embodies and the vested interests they have created, and the way it has adapted to its environment . . . In what is perhaps its most significant meaning, to institutionalize is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand' (Selznick, 1957: 16–17). The sociological version of the neo-institutional approach to organizations therefore puts more stress on the importance of cognitive schemata, cultural values, standards and rules which are characterized by strongly infusing the perceptions of the players and that consequently influence both the future actions of their members and also the institutions themselves (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

This neo-institutional perspective posits that the 'institutional conditions' of origin constitute a framework from which further institutional changes rarely depart radically. In other words, a path dependency somehow traces the outline of the institutional changes, and the reforms and transformations are marked as much by elements of continuity as by drivers of innovation. By stressing the importance of the history of institutions as well as that of values and culture in the development and structuring of organizations, the neo-institutional approach thus insists instead on the more specifically incremental nature of institutional reforms rather than on transformations on a larger scale (Kuhlmann, 2010b: 1117).

While our approach may be inspired mainly by the neo-institutionalist approach, it cannot ignore the literature on the sociology of elites, which is primarily concerned with the members of the political body, more rarely with the senior executives of the public administration (Genieys, 2011). The study of political elites highlights the importance of the link between political structures (or type of political regime) and the profile of political elites, between which there is far-reaching interaction. The structures thus influence the profiles, just as the elites in place have an impact on the said structures. The sociographic profile of the elites therefore differs from an authoritarian regime, for example, in being a more democratic regime (Page and Wright, 1999). This reflection can thus be compared with the neo-institutionalist considerations presented above. Therefore, we start from the main idea that the characteristics of Swiss administrative elites reflect the particular features of a specific institutional order. The latter is closely related to the structure and workings of the federal administration, the values that prevail within it, career paths that are referred to as 'normal' or regarded as 'legitimate' and thus contributing to a certain reproduction of elites. In this article, we will be careful to forge a link between state and institutional structures and characteristics of

administrative elites. In particular, we will question the evolution of the particular features of the career path of elites through two main indicators: the educational background of these elites and the origin of the elites, that is to say, whether they are the product of a career path internal to the administration or rather one external to it. The main idea here is to anticipate a change in the characteristics of the administrative elites following the adoption of reforms that have altered the institutional order within which the players in question evolve.

On the basis of these theoretical references, we are therefore able to formulate two research proposals. The first relates to the persistence of a particular high profile of senior civil servant in Switzerland. We posit, in the form of a first proposal, that federal senior executives in Switzerland have mostly 'traditional' profiles that have been observed for nearly 100 years (see below), that is to say that their career path is made possible by their academic background in the field of law, by an internal promotion through the hierarchical levels, and that they are the products of a career path primarily exercised in the public sector, where the 'military career' component remains important.

That being said, the characteristics of the executives of the public administration are evolving in the wake of institutional and organizational changes prompted by successive administrative reforms, including the implementation of principles and tools inspired by NPM (Giauque and Emery, 2008). The institutional order is thereby affected and to some extent transformed. It is therefore probable to pinpoint slow, incremental changes that nonetheless signify the characteristics specific to the administrative elites, which is why we examine in the second proposal the emergence of a new type of administrative elite whose main characteristics are: they have an academic background in management and economics, are more likely to come from outside the administration or the public sector, are increasingly mobile and are not as likely to come from the officer corps of the Swiss army.

### **Some Swiss institutional characteristics**

As mentioned earlier, the institutional order within which the Swiss administrative elites evolve has a particular history and consists of specific organizations and structures. Consistent with our institutionalist thinking, below we will present some Swiss institutional characteristics. These are likely to be explanatory factors regarding the specific characteristics of the Swiss administrative elites.

#### *The mark of origin*

Switzerland is a highly decentralized federal state, a mark of its origins, as it developed on the basis of an agreement between cantons (regional or provincial level), which still have considerable autonomy and independence from the federal level. Despite a gradual centralization of certain areas of expertise, cantonal prerogatives remain very high (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008).

The dependency of the federal level on the cantonal level is also reflected in the composition of the federal parliament. Swiss bicameralism is based on two houses: the National Council (representing the people) and the Council of States (representing the cantons). Accordingly, in the composition of the political elite the cantonal logic also prevails, especially as the federal parliament (composed of representatives of cantons) have significant powers to control, amend or propose laws, not to mention the many opportunities offered directly to the cantons to propose laws or submit federal laws to a referendum. The ‘cooperative federalism’ or *executive* federalism characterizing the Swiss political system is today well documented (Braun, 2000).

### *The organization of the government and the relationship between the administration and the political institutions*

The Swiss political system is also characterized by its institutions of direct democracy (Papadopoulos, 1998), making it a rather unusual case. A large number of ‘safeguards’ have therefore been created to enable citizens, even at the cantonal and communal governance levels, to participate in the definition of public policies (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008: 50–51). On the other hand, pre-parliamentary phases are often set up to integrate the most powerful interest groups in the preparatory phase of *projet de loi* (consultation phase), allowing the Swiss political system to be described as a *neo-corporatist* model.

Therefore, the marks of origin of the Swiss federal state, highly decentralized, based on institutions of direct democracy, incorporating interest groups in the decision-making process and favouring a style of ‘concordance government’ (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008), constitute institutional features that very strongly permeate the structuring and workings of the administrative apparatus, particularly at senior management levels. These institutional characteristics produce their direct effects on the ‘thinkable’ and/or ‘possible’ when it comes to administrative workings but also in terms of administrative reforms. The Swiss bureaucratic apparatus is thus the mirror of the Swiss political institutions, even if it must sometimes counterbalance some of its flaws. It is notably marked by the ‘militia’ character of the Swiss political system, as the majority of politicians are not professional politicians. Therefore, the state bureaucracy has become a key partner in decision-making, since its expertise is in high demand on different matters. In a more managerialized environment, the highly sought for profile of senior executives increasingly integrates skills formerly reserved for the running of private business: strategic management, cost optimization, customer orientation, to name but a few.

### *An ‘open’ civil service*

The profile and career path of Swiss public officials are very diverse. They are selected not on the basis of a specific course of study leading to a competitive examination (*concours*), as is the case in France, but on the basis of specific



skills as part of a classic recruitment drive, in principle open to all citizens. The Swiss civil service is not a career civil service, but a so-called *open* system (Germann and Graf, 1988) in which every citizen is entitled to seek public office, including at the upper echelons, of course subject to the qualifications and skills sought in the profiles (Giauque and Emery, 2008). Therefore, it is not uncommon to encounter heterogeneous profiles, where employees having spent their entire career in public organizations work alongside colleagues from the private sector, and at all levels of the hierarchy. This permeability between public and private sectors, typical of an open civil service is, in a way, a reflection of the openness of the Swiss political system to different interest groups making up civil society (see above); it also contributes, to a greater or lesser extent, to the representative nature of the civil service in general (Rosenbloom and Dolan, 2006).

### *Senior executives in the Swiss public administration*

While this contribution is focused on the senior executives of the federal administration, the most important functions in the hierarchy of Swiss federalism, it is clear that from a purely quantitative point of view the vast majority of the senior executives work in the cantons and Swiss cities (some 140).<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the Swiss system does not work with ministerial ‘cabinets’, as is the case with many French-speaking countries (e.g. France or Belgium): the political staff associated with members of the government is limited to one or two *personal advisers*. This means that the senior executives of the administration report directly to the members of the government. They run structural entities usually called an ‘office’ (this is the case in the federal government) or ‘service’ (most often in the cantons and communes). These ‘line’ functions are joined among the senior executives by the functions of secretary-general and chancellor, and, for the specific case of the federal administration, that of Secretary of State<sup>4</sup> in charge of functions involving negotiations with other States at the highest level (art. 46, LOGA). Thus, within the federal government, some 70 senior executives can be identified. In practice, it is not uncommon to consider that the people replacing the incumbents (Acting Director) are also senior executives, even if we have not included them in our analyses. Finally, note that the senior executives are not appointed according to their political affiliation, but above all on the basis of their skills profile although it would be an exaggeration to say that political affiliation (if acknowledged) plays no role (Giauque et al., 2009).

### *Permeability and openness to the world of business*

As much as the characteristics of the Swiss political system, driven by a search for balance and consensus, can contribute to a certain stalling of institutional reforms, as much as the bureaucratic apparatus proves for its part to be very open to the methods, management principles and tools specific to the world of private enterprises, because of its composition, on the one hand, and the employment conditions

prevailing there, on the other hand. The approach to administrative reforms is often called ‘technocratic’ and ‘apolitical’ to highlight the growing importance of the modernization of management principles within the administration (Hablützel et al., 1995; Varone 2006: 295). The New Public Management projects have also, for the most part, been initiated and supported by the senior management of the administration rather than by members of the government or parliament (Giauque and Emery, 2008).

## Survey methodology

As explained above, the career paths of Swiss senior executives will mainly be understood through three indicators: the first relates to the academic background of the senior public officials, i.e. the level of education (university or non-university), and the discipline (law, economics, humanities, etc.). The second indicator is related to the social capital, an indicator of the circles in which the elite socialize and mix. In this case, we will restrict ourselves to the question of the military career that has often been considered to hold a central place for Swiss elites (whether political, economic or administrative for that matter) (Mach et al., 2011). Finally, a third indicator has been considered here, namely the career path of the elites: above all the product of the administrative world itself (by internal promotion) or from outside the administrative field (external recruitment). The institutional order within which the administrative elites evolve is therefore mainly approached on the basis of these three indicators that make it possible to reconstruct a ‘typical profile’ of a career path. However, some paths are more compatible with a specific institutional order, thus giving players adequate and legitimate resources to be part of the elite. Hence the importance of identifying ‘typical’ career paths, in the Weberian sense, including obstacles along these paths following administrative reforms. Of course, the choice of these different indicators of Swiss administrative elite ignores several important dimensions, such as the economic capital of these elites (their links with the business world) and their political capital (their different affiliations or political affiliations). We do not overlook the importance of the latter dimensions; however, in the absence of empirical data at our disposal, we simply are not able to use them in this study. The chosen approach, popular in studies of elites, is a diachronic sociographic approach.

Depending on the theoretical framework chosen, it is important to put into historical perspective the possible evolution of the career paths of administrative elites to assess the extent to which a link can be established between the institutional characteristics of the Swiss administrative apparatus and the profiles which have been observed. Data availability has forced us to focus the analysis on the senior executives active at federal level, as sparse data are available on their cantonal counterparts. The ‘federal’ focus is a clear limit to this analysis and leads us to be cautious about extrapolating the findings. However, the federal level, the summit of the Swiss federalist structure, is often regarded as particularly illustrative of trends applicable to the Swiss administrative apparatus in general.<sup>5</sup> It should be

noted that the analysis does not focus on the actual skills of the senior executives, as the data on this are few and fare between (see the Conclusion, below).

To gather information about the academic background of Swiss senior executives, we proceeded in two phases. We started off by summarizing the existing literature on this subject, a sparse secondary literature that is mostly dated, to make it possible to put together an initial standard profile of Swiss senior executives, and of the developments that have characterized them.

In a second step, we relied on primary data<sup>6</sup> drawn from the research project entitled 'Swiss elites in the twentieth century: An ongoing process of differentiation?',<sup>7</sup> directed by A. Mach and T. David of the University of Lausanne and financed by the National Fund for Scientific Research (FNS). The database developed within the framework of this project allows an analysis of the biographical profile of Swiss administrative elites on six *cohorts*<sup>8</sup> spread over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: 1910, 1937, 1957, 1980, 2000 and 2010. These cohorts, separated by an interval of around 20 years (except for the last), make it possible to highlight the changes in the composition and profile of federal administrative elites.<sup>9</sup> Note that the samples studied in this investigation correspond in fact to almost all of the population of Swiss federal executives, and this for the six cohorts under study.

On the basis of *positional* type approach to the elites (Mach et al., 2011), this database lists the senior executives at the apex of the administrative apparatus and in direct contact with members of the government. The sample is thus composed of the secretaries-general of the seven Federal Departments and the directors of the Federal Offices. To these two groups of senior civil servants have been added the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellors of the Confederation and the members of the Board of the Swiss National Bank (SNB), two of the most central authorities of the Swiss institutions. The first because it is the headquarters of the federal government<sup>10</sup> and the second because it is in charge of monetary policy in Switzerland. Moreover, in the framework of *agentification* movement (Gilardi 2002, 2008; Maggetti, 2007) some autonomous regulatory bodies such as the Competition Commission, the Swiss Agency for Therapeutic Products (Swissmedic), or the Federal Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA) were also included in 2000 and 2010.

## **Presentation and discussion of the results: changing profiles of Swiss administrative elites**

The Swiss elites underwent a process of differentiation and professionalization during the post-war period (Klöti, 1972). This consolidated the model of the senior civil servant who is an expert in a particular domain or field, and is promoted to executive functions on the basis of technical expertise. University education has always played an important role in the appointment of senior civil servants (see Table 2), but it tends to become an almost indispensable criterion to fill a senior civil service position, even though the vocational school or apprenticeships

**Table 1.** Sample of the exploration of the six 'cohorts'

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010	Total
Federal Department of Defence, protection of the population and sports	11	17	19	20	9	12	88
Federal Department of Home Affairs	15	12	13	17	14	13	84
Federal Department of Finance	7	9	10	12	11	11	60
Federal Department of the Economy	4	8	10	8	9	11	50
Federal Department of Justice and the Police	5	6	6	10	10	7	44
Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communication	4	7	6	5	8	8	38
Federal Department of Foreign Affairs	2	2	3	5	4	5	21
Swiss National Bank	3	3	3	3	3	3	18
Federal Chancellery	3	2	2	3	3	3	16
Total	54	66	72	83	71	73	419

**Table 2.** Educational background of the senior civil servants studied

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Non-university	24.1%	15.2%	4.2%	6.0%	4.2%	2.7%
Indeterminate	14.8%	1.5%	2.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
University	61.1%	83.3%	93.1%	94.0%	95.8%	97.3%

are training channels that have only decreased over time as only 2.7 percent of senior civil servants declare that they do not have a university background in 2010.

This finding, which differs significantly from that for business elites (Mach et al., 2011), is reminiscent of that put forward by Roth in 1994, author of one of the few studies relating to our target population, according to which almost all senior executives of the Confederation are holders of a higher education diploma, while having an average age of over 50 years, which means that when they received this diploma, they were part of an elite since fewer than 5 percent of the population held such diplomas at the time (Roth, 1994). On the other hand, the same author states that, at that time, legal studies were the most common (36.2 percent), followed by natural sciences (22.9 percent), humanities and social sciences (18.1 percent), while economics and business studies only accounted for 8.6 percent (Roth, 1994: 25). He notes that the proportion of lawyers has fallen sharply, while that of those studying social and economic sciences is increasing significantly. In fact, the oldest data provided by Klöti (1972: 175) indicate, for example, that in 1969 these same figures showed an even higher proportion of lawyers (42 percent), while engineers

**Table 3.** Types of studies followed by the Swiss administrative elites according to cohort

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Technical/natural/medicine/maths	37.0%	37.9%	36.1%	27.7%	23.9%	23.3%
Economic/business	16.7%	13.6%	15.3%	19.3%	26.8%	31.5%
Law	20.4%	39.4%	36.1%	44.6%	32.4%	31.5%
Humanities	11.1%	9.1%	8.3%	12.0%	19.7%	15.1%
Others	7.4%	3.0%	5.6%	1.2%	2.8%	2.7%
Indeterminate	14.8%	1.5%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Total	107.4%	104.5%	105.6%	104.8%	105.6%	104.1%

Note: The totals exceed 100% because some senior civil servants followed several courses of study.

**Table 4.** Senior civil servants who have undergone additional training

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Senior civil servants who have undergone additional training (%)	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	1.4%	20.5%

accounted for 20 percent, social scientists and economists 10 percent, and natural scientists 5 percent.

But what are the academic disciplines preferred by public sector senior executives at the federal level? While law courses seem to be holding up during the six periods under observation (see Table 3), note the significant increase in the number of senior civil servants who have an academic background in economics and the equally significant decrease in the number of those with a university degree in technical and natural sciences (the polytechnicians). The proportion of senior civil servants holding a university degree in economics is equivalent to that of senior civil servants with a university degree in law with respect to the cohort of 2010. Thus, the early 1950s marked a major shift from the previous situation, with a sharp increase in public sector senior executives having studied economics (Rebmann, 2011: 105).

Based on these data, we can observe that until the early 2000s, the academic disciplines most likely to lead to a career as a public executive was law. The institutional order peculiar to the federal administration until then therefore legitimizes this type of academic background. By contrast, from the 2000s, we have witnessed an increase in the number of public sector senior executives with a university degree in economics/business. The 2010 cohort indicates that the holders of a university degree in economics/business are as numerous as the holders of a university degree in law. Managerial reforms in the administration can lead to institutional changes that, in turn, impact on the profiles of senior executives in the public sector. Is the institutional order peculiar to the Swiss federal administrative elites undergoing

change, thus legitimizing other academic courses, closer to disciplines such as economics or business? However, the inverse relationship could also be defended; a profile change can bring more reform projects. Without being able to offer any proof of this due to the method used, ASA-type mechanisms (attraction – selection – attrition) (Wright and Christensen, 2010) have probably led to federal offices offering more entrepreneurial latitude have attracted executives with a background in economics or management, including some from the private sector. It is also interesting to note that this debate is not new. As far back as the 1970s, Klöti discussed the most suitable profile to exercise the executive functions within the administration, comparing experts, those with degrees in subjects related to the field of the office held, and the generalists, with a broader, public administration background,<sup>11</sup> a non-existent discipline in Switzerland. The Swiss philosophy in this area, close to that of Germany, for example, is unlike that of other countries that favour generalists, such as Great Britain (Urio, 1989). Klöti raised the hypothesis, 40 years ago, that the proportion of economists in leadership positions should increase.

### *The demand for new skills*

The movement triggered by NPM is producing a new culture shock as the model of the senior civil servant expert in his field is being quite brutally challenged by the figure of the manager (Hablützel, 2013). Technical specialists excelling in their field of public policy, it is up to them to turn into strategists cum managers capable of analysing their environment and their service to set out the avenues for development, to acquire leadership qualities likely to boost their teams, to control their production costs on the basis of principles derived from cost accounting, to maximize benefits and services provided to the ‘customers’ along the lines of quality management, as well as introducing dashboards and indicators to control their activities. These are all skills that are developed primarily in university courses related to business management, to a lesser degree in public administration, and skills also developed by continuous training on the themes of public management.

Our six cohorts show an increase in the number of civil servants who have undergone continuous education. From 1910 to 1980 (with the exception of the cohort of 1957) no senior civil servant declared that they had received continuous education, compared with 1.4 percent and 20.5 percent in 2000 and 2010, respectively. The development of continuous education programmes offered to, and often imposed on, the administration executives explains this evolution (Emery et al., 2004; Germann and Graf, 1988). Moreover, most of the continuous education courses attended (though their number remains modest for the cohorts analysed for the purposes of this study) focus on the areas of ‘business’ and ‘government’ (see Table 5 in particular), reflecting a drive to equip senior executives with concepts and tools corresponding to the movement of New Public Management mentioned above.

**Table 5.** The channels mainly followed within the framework of additional training (continuous education)

Channels followed	1957	2000	2010
Business	0	1	8
Public administration	0	0	2
Security	0	0	2
Law	0	0	2
Others	1	0	3
Total	1	1	17

Given the growing complexity of the roles to be assumed by public managers, it is hardly surprising that the range of skills they require continues to grow, as we observed more than ten years ago (Emery, 1997). Some comparative studies highlight this in particular, especially that of Kuperus and Rode conducted into the profiles of senior executives in the countries of the European Union, and that sets out to identify the new skills needed by European senior executives (Kuperus and Rode, 2008). In this case in point, the most frequent common skills are: leadership, vision, strategy, achievement of results, communication, human resource management and interpersonal relations, general management, and finally technical knowledge. It clearly shows that technical skills, once dominant, are somehow ‘watered down’ within a set of skills typical of (public) management.<sup>12</sup> While the link between the course of study and skills is not always established, we assume that these new sought-after skills are reflected in the evolution of the initial and additional academic curriculum of the senior executives.

### *Military training remains important*

Analyses conducted by Roth highlight the fact that ‘the frequency of number of officers among the senior civil servants of the Confederation is sufficiently high (greater than 50 percent since 1938, excluding military administration)...to emphasize the importance granted to this personal and direct commitment to the state. The very marked social and symbolic valorization of military rank as a general skill in terms of organization and command has spread by an osmotic effect throughout Swiss society’ (Roth, 1994: 133). This means that, at the time, management skills were presumed to have been achieved by attending officer school, which is also controlled by the federal government itself. If we look more closely at this very special variable, i.e. membership of Swiss senior executives in the family of officers, it appears that it remains stable until the 2000s before undergoing a remarkable development during the first decade of the twenty-first century. In our study, the 2010 cohort showed a significant change to the extent that the number of senior civil servants who are not military staff for the first time exceeds the number of their counterparts with officer rank (see Table 6). Given the

**Table 6.** Military grades of Swiss senior civil servants

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Officers	50.0%	56.1%	61.1%	61.4%	59.2%	42.50%
Undetermined	1.9%	1.5%	2.8%	1.2%	0.0%	8.2%
Non officer	48.1%	42.4%	36.1%	37.3%	40.8%	49.3%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

relative stability of this ‘army’ variable, it is probably too early to draw definitive conclusions regarding the weakening of the importance of this membership to a career as a senior executive within the federal government.

While being a military officer is still an advantage when it comes to obtaining an executive position within the federal government, representing an informal process of acculturation to the administrative executive functions, this condition has become less and less pervasive in recent appointments.

### *Executive mobility between the public and private sectors*

Another indicator that helps understand the career paths of senior executives in the public sector relates to their mobility between the public and private sectors. The Swiss public administration has no single place of training to prepare its members for public office, and recruitment takes place according to an open system (see above). This obviously causes more cross ‘traffic’ between the public and private sectors.<sup>13</sup> While, theoretically, an open recruitment system may cause more exchanges between sectors, senior executives within the Swiss public administration are nonetheless often recruited mainly from the public sector, climbing more or less rapidly the hierarchical levels (the figure of the *climber*). This is overwhelmingly the case for federal senior civil servants in Switzerland, even if, here as well, slow but noticeable changes are at work. Thus, between 1910 and 1980, the proportion of senior civil servants recruited from outside the administration (the figure of the parachuted incumbent) remained stable and at a relatively low level (between a minimum of 7 percent and a maximum of 12.3 percent). Note that the ‘other’ category includes those already working in the federal government at the time of their appointment, but having less than ten years of seniority.

A significant shift occurs during the period 1980–2010 since, when studying the cohort of senior civil servants of the year 2000, we can see that 26.8 percent of them were recruited from outside the administration, 12.7 percent from the business community. Table 7 shows that in 2010 the proportion of ‘parachuted’ incumbents settles somewhat (23.3 percent) while the number of incumbents from the business community increases (16.4 percent) (Table 8).

This trend backs up our hypothesis that the profile of the senior executives of the Swiss federal administration is moving towards diversification and tending towards



**Table 7.** Career path of Swiss senior civil servants

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Climbers	51.9%	56.1%	66.7%	59.0%	47.9%	45.2%
Other	37.0%	31.8%	26.4%	28.9%	25.4%	31.5%
Parachuted	11.1%	12.1%	6.9%	12.0%	26.8%	23.3%

**Table 8.** Origin of the parachuted Swiss senior civil servants

	1910	1937	1957	1980	2000	2010
Academic	0.0%	1.5%	1.4%	1.2%	8.5%	5.5%
Economic	7.4%	10.6%	4.2%	9.6%	12.7%	16.4%
Other	3.7%	0.0%	1.4%	1.2%	5.6%	1.4%

candidates with more ‘entrepreneurial’ career paths, with a focus on enterprise and business. It also demonstrates greater permeability between sectors, a phenomenon probably related to the slow but explicit rise in managerial references from the world of private enterprise in the management of federal public organizations, obviously demanding new skills from the senior civil servants that are probably easier to find outside the administration than within (Giauque and Emery, 2008). In connection with the NPM reforms in recent years, one can assume that private managers are increasingly attracted by the exercise of executive functions within these public administrative structures, due to the transferability of skills acquired in the private sector (see the ASA mechanism mentioned above).

Moreover, this is a movement that does not shift in only one direction, to the extent that the senior executives of the administration are increasingly likely not to end their career within the civil service, which is equivalent to a career switch. ‘The age at which they end a position speaks volumes in this respect, as senior civil servants tend to leave their posts at an increasingly younger age. While in 1910 the typical civil servant left their job on the eve of their 67th birthday generally to go into retirement, in 2000, they left at the age of around 59, allowing them to start a new career in the private sector . . . In other words, it is likely that the position of senior civil servant was considered the culmination of a career in 1910, while in 2000 it was considered rather as a step to access another position within the private sector in particular’ (Rebmann, 2011: 108–109). The practice of ‘pantouflage’ (the employment of former State officials in the private sector), well documented and described by specialists from French public administration (Rouban, 2004, 2009), therefore seems to be taking root in Switzerland as well, although the phenomenon is very recent and remains to be confirmed.

## Conclusions and avenues for further research

Based on the above results and discussions, the major trends at work in relation to the characteristics of the Swiss federal senior civil servants can be summarized as follows:

- First, the study focusing on six cohorts reveals the relative stability of the profiles, supporting our first research proposal: senior executives at federal level are still mostly university educated, with a background in law, who have a significant seniority, who have spent their career mainly in public administration, who have risen through the ranks via internal promotions (the figure of climbers) and mostly declaring (with the exception of the 2010 cohort) the grade of officer in the army. This relative stability can be explained, from our point of view, by the paths of dependency that constitute the history and the special structures of the Swiss political and administrative institutions. However, this hegemonic institutional order prevalent until the mid-1990s, is currently challenged by institutional, organizational and managerial reforms in the wake of NPM.
- Also, our second point, a progressive drive to managerialize the population under review appears to be a trend discernible by the significant increase in the number of senior executives that have a university background in social sciences (especially in economics), the increased completion of continuous education courses in ‘economics/business’ and ‘public administration’, as well as the rise in the number of public executives from the business community and the private sector (parachuted incumbents). It seems to us that these trends are sufficiently strong as to be considered serious indicators of the aforementioned managerialization. Does this herald the emergence of a new institutional order hinged around more ‘economic and managerial’ referents?
- Third, the significant decrease in the number of officers within this population of senior federal civil servants is a unique fact since the beginning of the twenty-first century; however, the phenomenon is too recent to be considered a sustainable trend and indicative of a systemic upheaval in the profile of Swiss public civil servants.

On the basis of the foregoing, our second research proposal is also tentatively supported by our results: the career paths of public senior executives are slowly changing, at least at the federal level. There is nothing revolutionary about these changes, as we expected, mainly because the path dependences are well-entrenched markers that are difficult to circumvent, but these are slow transformations mainly due to the organizational and institutional changes that we have outlined in our thinking. That being said, the greater permeability of the Swiss federal offices to the business world and private companies, demonstrated in particular by the significant increase in *parachuted incumbents* to the detriment of the *climbers*, by the increase in ‘economic/business’ profiles at the expense of ‘polytechnic’ and ‘lawyer’ profiles and by the recent decline in the number of officers within the population of senior

civil servants, are trends that widely echo recent developments observed more generally among the Swiss *economic* elites. The legitimacy of the institutional order that prevailed into the 1990s is thus challenged by recent institutional and organizational changes within the federal administrations. This opens a period of redefinition of a new institutional order, probably more permeated by the logic and values of business and management, allowing the emergence of new career paths.

In a recent study into cohorts of Swiss economic elites, Mach et al. (2011) pointed out changes that are similar to those we reveal in our own research. They note the declining importance of military rank, highlight the managerialization of economic elites (including the fact that they are more likely to have attended business schools) and note the arrival of an elite that is more diverse and more international within the boards of major Swiss companies, thus revealing a greater permeability of the Swiss economic fabric with international and mainly Anglo-Saxon influences. Therefore, striking similarities can be found between the trends at work in the private and public sectors when it comes to the profiles of their leaders, which is why we hypothesize that there is a 'structural homology' between the development of public and private elites in Switzerland.

The analysis in this article, however, has some limitations. The first relates to the reductive nature of the indicator used for our analysis: academic background (and continuous education). The course of study is not synonymous with acquired skills or with the behaviour adopted in practice (Barzucetti and Claude, 1995; Kirkpatrick, 1959). At an even deeper level, the values underlying this behaviour, the foundation of the professional identity of senior executives, cannot be analysed by the method followed. A qualitative in-depth investigation is still needed to answer this question, which should enquire into senior executives' and their work partners' perceptions of the ongoing developments (Fortier, 2011).

With the exception of a recent study (Rebmann, 2011) and other studies that are now more dated (Klöti, 1972; Roth, 1994; Urio, 1989), there are no surveys specifically on the sociology of administrative elites. Therefore, this article is an original contribution to studies that set out to better understand who are the Swiss administrative elites, and to assess to what extent the trends summarized above are confirmed and continue to resemble the changes witnessed among the economic elites. Given the traditional proximity and relative permeability between public and private sectors in Switzerland as well as the emphasis on the managerial modernization of public organizations, this 'structural homology' hypothesis in the evolution of public and private elites seems to be an idea to pursue. By reversing the perspective, one could also in this regard ask to what extent the managerialization of public executive profiles is not a form of creeping institutionalization of private interests, but here too, the methodology does not allow an answer.

Finally, the fact that the analysis is based on statistics related to six 'cohorts', consisting of a relatively small number of senior executives of the Confederation, compared with all public senior executives at all levels of federalism, is an objective

limit to the trends highlighted, which cannot be extrapolated. Similarly, in the absence of data, with a few exceptions (see Survey Methodology section) on the profiles of the heads of newly independent organizations developed in Switzerland during the last decade (including the independent regulatory agencies), it is difficult to ascertain whether these new organizational and institutional forms will generate other types of elites. Research to fill these gaps in our knowledge will have to be undertaken in the coming years.

## Notes

1. The term 'civil servant' has been largely shelved by the statutes of the civil service in Switzerland (Bellanger and Roy, 2013), which is why we prefer to use the expression senior executives.
2. Within the communal administrations (around 2400 in Switzerland) there are naturally also senior executives that have the same role as heads of service. In some large cities, heads of service can have higher managerial responsibilities (in terms of staff reporting to them, budget, etc.) than those of small cantons.
3. See [http://www.badac.ch/db/db.php?abs=region5\\_1&code=Vs3.12d&annee=X&arg=&lang=Fr](http://www.badac.ch/db/db.php?abs=region5_1&code=Vs3.12d&annee=X&arg=&lang=Fr) (consulted on 5 July 2013.)
4. See (RS 172.010 Law of 21 March 1997 on the organization of the government and the administration (LOGA).
5. That is the case, for example, for the case of the status of the federal civil service, which gives an indication for the cantons and the communes (see Bellanger and Roy, 2013).
6. To be precise, one of the authors of this article (F. Rebmann) is responsible for gathering data on the basis of which this analysis is founded.
7. See [www.unil.ch/iepi/page54315.html](http://www.unil.ch/iepi/page54315.html)
8. The term 'cohort' is not completely accurate in that the people that make up these cohorts have not been the subject of a longitudinal follow-up. They are more like 'intersections' of the senior civil service, carried out at different key moments chosen for their historical significance.
9. The profiles correspond to the persons in service *at the time of the analysis* and not at the point they took up service, which in most cases is prior to the analysis performed.
10. Art. 30 to 34 LOGA.
11. The author quotes the example of France (ENA – National School of Administration), while noting that for Switzerland at the time there was no graduate school specializing in public administration.
12. It should be noted on this point that the list of reference skills developed within the federal administrations contains many skills relating to management, social skills and personal skills that match those that we have just listed. See <http://www.epa.admin.ch/themen/ausbildung/00268/index.html?lang=fr>
13. According to information provided by the Federal Office of Personnel, between 2008 and 2012 more than 24 percent of the resignations recorded involved people who left their jobs in order to work in the private sector. This figure is certainly underestimated because many of those who resigned did not indicate the sector to which they were moving (f2012: 1575 resignations, including 384 for the private sector and 1092 who had not provided precise information).

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**Yves Emery** holds a doctorate in economics from the University of Geneva, is a full professor at the Graduate School of Public Administration (IDHEAP, University of Lausanne, Switzerland) and head of the public management and human resource management research unit. He is research director, consultant in many public services at Swiss and international level, author of many books and scientific articles. He is associate editor for the *International Review of Administrative Sciences (IRAS)*, and member of the editorial boards of several scientific and professional journals.

**David Giauque** is associate professor at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland), member of the Institute of Political and International Studies (IEPI) and member of the Swiss Public Administration Network (SPAN). His research focuses mainly on the following areas: sociology of organizations and administrations; management of public human resources; public administration reforms; public service motivation; public values. He has recently completed research into occupational health among middle managers of Swiss hospitals facing major changes.

**Frédéric Rebmann** is a PhD student at the University of Lausanne. He worked on the research project entitled 'The Swiss elite in the 20th century: An ongoing process of differentiation?', funded by the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research (FNS). He is currently completing a doctoral thesis on the history of the Swiss federal administration from the point of view of the senior civil service, the extra-parliamentary commissions and bodies in charge of regulating competition between 1910 and 2010.