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Autor: Tschanz, Pierre-André
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Scratch then vote

BY PIERRE-ANDRÉ TSCHANZ

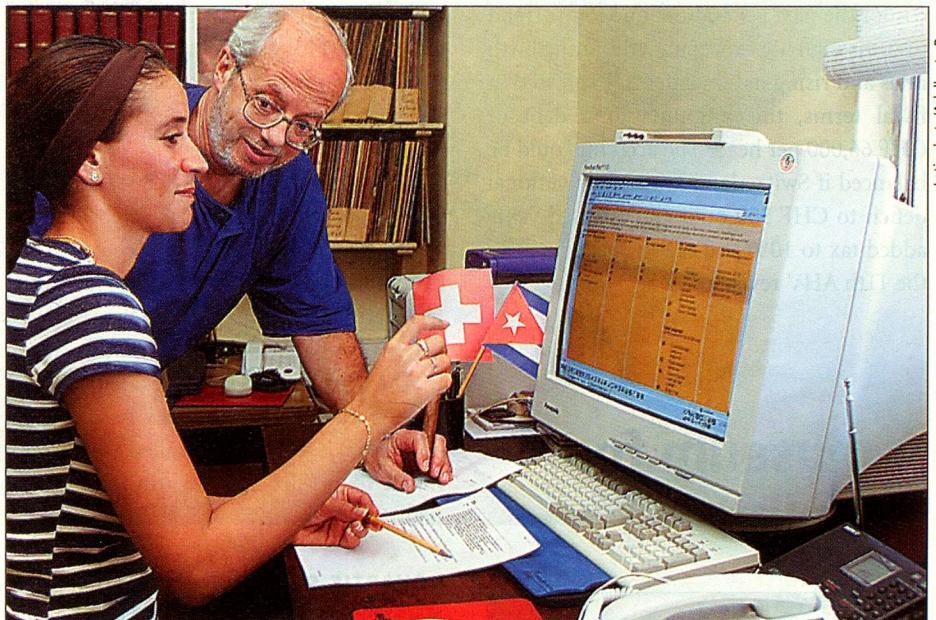
Switzerland is entering the age of "cyberdemocracy". Government-supported pilot projects to test e-voting are under way in three cantons.

THESE PROJECTS are of major interest to Swiss Abroad, particularly the 70,000 or so who regularly exercise the right (first granted nine years ago) to vote by post; because electronic voting would eliminate the main problem encountered by Swiss Abroad wishing to cast their vote – the problem of delays in the arrival of postal ballots. At the beginning of summer the requisite legal reforms commenced their passage through parliament (public hearing process). "Nation-wide electronic voting, however, will not be possible before 2010," warns the Federal Chancellery.

Report in autumn

Before year-end the Federal Council aims to submit a report on the feasibility of e-voting, the resources required and the possibility of phased implementation. The report will also present and evaluate various alternative solutions. At the end of this year or the beginning of the next, the first pilot trial will be launched in the canton of Geneva, followed slightly later by the cantons of Neuchâtel and Zurich.

Before Switzerland is able to fully enter the electronic age, it must unravel the Gordian knot of electronic signature. This would significantly simplify and accelerate administrative processes. However, as Vice Chancellor Hanna Muralt Müller points out, the introduction of e-voting necessitates not only a secure electronic signature system, but also the creation of a federal voting register.



E-voting aims to eliminate frustrating delays in the receipt of ballot slips.

Geneva paves the way

Residents of Geneva will be the first in Switzerland to vote electronically. "Quite simply, we are endeavouring to offer everyone an additional service," explains Geneva State Councillor Robert Hensler. In autumn Geneva will conduct an initial trial with school classes, but e-voting will only be tested in the field in the early half of 2002, at the cantonal and communal level. The Geneva pilot projects will cost roughly a million francs, the majority of which is government-funded.

The main problems to be solved are in the area of security and voting secrecy. As before, the 207,000 voters on the electoral roll will receive their ballots by post. The only difference is in the new-design ballot slip, which will contain a scratch pad with PIN code to verify the eligibility of the electronic voter.

Zurich: 1:1 trial

By contrast, the e-voting process is still in its infancy in the canton of Neuchâtel with its 100,000 or more voters. Here the problems are more complex than in Geneva. "First we need to centralise the information flow between the canton and its 62 communities," explains Jean-Luc Abbet, head of the can-

tonal information technology (IT) service. The pilot trial will not be launched before September 2002. Unlike Geneva, Neuchâtel has decided on a chip card based electronic system similar to the telebanking system.

Finally, the canton of Zurich is also taking part in e-voting trials. Currently it is planning to introduce electronic voting in December 2003. "That way we can primarily address the needs of young voters," stresses project leader David Knörr. The canton's test results will be enormously important, since Zurich with its 820,000 voters provides a highly representative testing ground.

Federal Referendums

23 September 2001
No federal referendum

2 December 2001
Subjects not yet decided.