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How to make sure your vote counts

When it is time to elect a new parliament, National Council elections are particularly relevant for Swiss nationals living abroad. Their votes can significantly influence the composition of this chamber.

The Swiss parliament is divided into two houses or chambers: the National Council and the Council of States. The National Council (also called the Large Chamber) has 200 seats and represents the whole population. The 200 seats are divided among full and half-cantons in proportion to the size of their population (Swiss and non-Swiss).

To be eligible to vote and stand for election, a person must have Swiss citizenship, be aged over 18, and not be certified as incompetent due to mental illness or deficiency. Residency in Switzerland is not a prerequisite for eligibility.

Every canton and half-canton represents a constituency; hence Switzerland is made up of 26 constituencies. Swiss nationals resident abroad are entitled to vote in the canton and constituency in which their voting municipality is located. However, they can be elected in any canton if they are proposed for election there. Candidates may only stand for election in one canton.

National Councillors are elected for a four-year period by proportional representation. The seats are distributed among the various parties in proportion to the number of votes cast in favour of the parties or their candidates. This way, minorities also have a chance of winning seats (unlike the majority or first-past-the-post system where minorities lose out; see below).



Interior view of the Houses of Parliament cupola with Swiss cross and cantonal coats of arms.

Pre-election

The individual parties submit their proposals for candidates to the responsible cantonal authority, which examines them and gives the signatories' representative a set time within which any errors must be corrected. The revised proposals are called lists. Eligible Swiss voters receive the ballot

slip in the form of a pre-printed party list, as well as a blank ballot slip. A list must contain no more candidate names than the constituency has National Council seats, and no name may appear more than twice. Candidates must not appear on several proposals in the same constituency or in several constituencies simul-

taneously (ban on multiple candidatures). Every proposal must contain an identifying header and be signed in their own hand by a defined minimum number of eligible voters resident in the constituency. No person eligible to vote may sign more than one proposal (ban on multiple signatures).

imagopress / Patrick Lüthy

Additional votes

Additional votes are votes cast in favour of the party rather than a specific candidate. Blank or scored-through lines are counted as additional votes for the party provided the ballot slip contains the party's name. If a party list contains fewer valid votes for candidates than there are seats in the constituency, the empty lines are counted as additional votes for the party in whose name the list was made out. In other words, votes in favour of a party are made up of votes for candidates and additional votes.

Mixing

Lists may be mixed. Two or more lists which are mixed are dealt with as a single list when distributing the mandates. This improves the chances for smaller parties to gain a seat, and allows parties to join forces in political blocks. Sub-lists may only be combined if the lists have the same heading but differ through additionally designating the sex of the candidate, the faction of a group, the region or the age.

To exercise your right to vote, use one of the lists which were sent to you in your voting envelope. You can cast your vote on the party list containing the names of candidates. The list must not contain more names than there are lines and no name must be listed more than twice on the list.

Once you have cast your vote, the party lists could look like this:

List 1: Party A

01.01 Anne Prima

01.02 Jacques Secundus

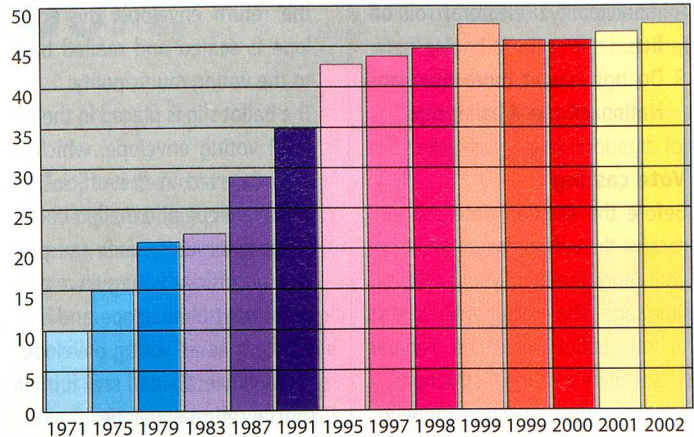
If this party list is submitted **unchanged**, every candidate receives one vote. The party wins as many votes as there are seats in its constituency.

List 2: Party B

02.01 Séraphine Tertius

~~02.02 Charles Quartus~~

Women on the National Council



Source: Federal Administration

On this pre-printed list one name has been **scored out**. Generally speaking, the list must contain at least one candidate. The candidate who has been scored out does not obtain a vote, but the line with the scored-through name (blank line/s) remains a party vote (additional vote) for Party B.

List 3: Party C

03.01 Pierre Quintus

~~03.02 Jean Sextus~~

03.01 Pierre Quintus

You can score a name off your list and repeat the name of another candidate on the list (**accumulation**). This means he receives two votes. Your list must not contain more names than there are lines. Through this action accumulated candidates benefit at the cost of the person whose name is scored through and the person who only appears once. However, this voting procedure has no effect on the number of votes for the party, which dictates the way in which seats are distributed among the parties. You cannot enter a candidate three or more times. Inverted commas, "ditto", "idem" and such like expressions are invalid.

List 4: Party D

04.01 Jules Septimus

~~04.02 Sophie Octava~~

03.01. Pierre Quintus

You can transfer names which appear on another list (in this case, List 3) to a pre-printed list (List 4) (**vote splitting**), but you must list only the names of candidates who figure on any of the lists sent to you. Party D loses a vote as well as the person whose name is scored out. At the same time the candidate you have transferred from another list benefits along with his party (List C obtains a vote). The split list must not contain any more candidates than can be elected.

Free/blank List

List No. Party

04.01 Jules Septimus

01.01 Anne Prima

If you designate a party at the top of the ballot slip, the blank lines are assigned to this party (= additional votes). If no party designation is entered, the votes go to the parties of the candidates to whom you have given your vote and who ultimately figure on the ballot slip; in this case the blank lines are not assigned to any party and are lost. Only candidates who appear on a party list can be entered on a blank list. However, they must not belong to the same party. Here, too, you may list candidates twice (accumulation). Please note that you may enter only as many names as there are National Council seats in your canton.

Important:

1. Only official ballot slips are valid.
2. Ballot slips must be completed or changed by hand. The changes must be clear and legible. The names must be written

What about the Council of States?

The Council of States (also called the Small Chamber) represents the cantons. All cantons send the same number of members to the Council of States: two representatives for full cantons and one for half-cantons (46 in total). However, the representatives make independent decisions rather than ruling in line with instructions from the cantons.

Since representatives are elected according to cantonal regulations, elections for State Councillors are not always held on the same voting weekend as National Council elections. State Councillors are elected by majority vote in almost all the cantons, although some apply the absolute majority while others provide for a second ballot. Only the canton of Jura applies the proportional representation system.

Since cantonal law is applicable for Council of State elections, Swiss Abroad can vote in the cantons which grant them the right to vote at cantonal level. Currently these are the cantons of Berne, Basle Country, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Solothurn, Schwyz and Ticino.

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out in full. Enter a candidate's name in such a way that there is no doubt about his or her identity (preferably with party affiliation). Include the candidate number.

3. Ballot slips must not be signed or otherwise distinguished.
4. Ballot slips with defamatory remarks are invalid.
5. Only as many names may be entered on the ballot slip as there are National Council seats in your canton.
6. Ballot slips must contain at least one valid candidate name. Only names which are listed on the pre-printed ballot slips are valid.
7. Voting by mail differs from one canton to another. If you wish to vote by mail as a Swiss Abroad, please read carefully the envelope and instructions which you receive from your voting municipality.
8. Swiss Abroad wishing to cast their vote in person in their voting municipality should notify the municipality in writing (or in person) in advance. If the municipality receives this notification at least six weeks before the election date, your Swiss Abroad voting documents are held back by the municipality. In such cases the voting material must be picked up in person

during the opening hours of the municipality's electoral roll office.

9. Do not submit more than one National Council ballot slip.

Vote casting

Before the election date you will receive the voting documents from your municipality in your preferred language. The documents consist of the ballot slips, the Federal Chancellery's voting instructions, a neutral voting envelope (depending on the cantonal regulations) for the voting municipality, a return envelope, and a separate voting permit if the return envelope does not count as such.

In many cases the return envelope (official reply envelope) doubles as a voting permit and must be signed before returning. Different cantons and communities require different procedures:

- The open ballot slip is placed in the return envelope, the envelope is sealed and mailed back to the voting municipality;
- The ballot slip is placed in the official voting envelope, which is then inserted in the official return envelope and mailed back;
- If the community does not provide an official voting envelope, use a neutral envelope and designate it as a "voting envelope" ("Wahlkuvert"), and seal it in an official return envelope.

Voting system

Alongside the system of proportional representation which is applied in most cantons for National Council elections, the majority or first-past-the-post system is also used in the cantons of Appenzell-Innerrhoden, Appenzell-Ausser rhoden, Uri, Obwalden, Nidwalden and Glarus since these

Federal people's initiatives ready for signing

No new initiatives have been submitted since the last issue.

Initiatives which have already been submitted and are at the signing stage can be viewed at <http://www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/vi/vis10.html>.

are entitled to only one National Council seat.

In the case of National Council elections in the above cantons, the relative majority decides i.e. the candidate who receives the most votes is elected.

Service for the Swiss Abroad/FDFA

Gabriela Brodbeck

Travel to the USA

We should like to remind you that new entry regulations will be introduced on 1 October 2003 for persons travelling to the USA. The formalities for visitors entering the country have been tightened in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

In this context we refer you to the article which appeared in the 2/03 issue of "Swiss Review".

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INTERNET

<http://www.parlament.ch/poly/framesets/D/Frame-D.htm>
<http://www.wahlen.ch/>
www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/nrw03/index.html

Special stamps on Switzerland's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

On 9 September the UNESCO World Heritage Site postage stamps will be issued (date on which franking validity commences). Each of the five stamps is devoted to one of Switzerland's cultural and natural sites which are entered on the UNESCO world heritage list. These are the Abbey precinct and Abbey library of St. Gallen, the St. Johann Benedictine convent in Münstair, the Old Town of Berne, the three castle fortresses of Bellinzona, and the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn region.

The 3/2003 issue of Swiss Post's stamp magazine "Focus on stamps", scheduled to appear at the end of July, will contain an introduction to the stamps along with background information on the UNESCO World Heritage List and the five Swiss world heritage sites. "Focus on stamps" is a stamp collector's magazine issued by the Swiss Post four times a year and is available free of charge from: Swiss Post, Stamps and Philately, Ostermundigenstrasse 91, CH-3030 Berne, Internet: www.post.ch (Stamps) or e-mail stamps@post.ch.

For further information, visit: www.unesco.ch. For the newsletter: info@unesco.ch

The Swiss UNESCO Committee