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Voting strengthens ties with home

Here's a tricky question: is 90,000 a big or a small number? 90,000 is the number of Swiss Abroad currently registered to exercise their voting right, yet it corresponds to only 20 percent of Swiss nationals of voting age resident abroad. And, depending on the subject of the vote, only 40 to 70 percent of these citizens actually go to the ballot.

Given these statistics, 90,000 could be regarded as a lot. After all, the turnout among Swiss voters here at home is often a mere 30 percent, despite the fact that they do not have to register on the electoral roll and it is much easier for them to find out about current Swiss affairs.

90,000 is a lot when one considers that this is 8,000 more than the figure recorded in 2002. And twelve years ago, when Swiss Abroad were first granted the right to vote by correspondence, only 14,000 took advantage of this opportunity. The Federal Council at the time was of the opinion that this figure would probably never exceed the 25,000 mark.

90,000 is also a lot because experience has shown that it can tip the balance of the vote and exert a direct influence on affairs in the home country, and because it is within tangible reach of the 100,000 threshold – the magic number required for submission of an initiative.

Yet in some important ways 90,000 is also a small number, because it corresponds to only one in five voters. They have left their home country but still retain their Swiss passport, thereby also retaining virtually all the rights granted by their citizenship. No matter where they live they can claim consular protection should the need arise. And should they decide to return to Switzerland, they can immediately exercise all their rights as if they had never left the country.

The Swiss Abroad Organisation also provides Swiss Abroad with free legal advice and information on studying in Switzerland, not to mention a free subscription to "Swiss Review".

Swiss Abroad are part of the Swiss community.

In Berne, in each and every canton and commune and at every Swiss diplomatic post, people work to ensure that legal and social ties with the home country are not broken.

Swiss Abroad need their first home country. And Switzerland needs its nationals abroad to provide a viable bridge to the world.

Switzerland would be far poorer without the votes of all those Swiss men and women abroad, who reflect in their own way on the image of our country and, by taking a political interest in affairs back home, provide links with the world.

For all these reasons it is a privilege to be able to take part in Swiss elections and referenda. If not a political obligation, it is at the very least an honour for all those who are sufficiently concerned about the future of their home country to register on the electoral roll and help to make Switzerland function effectively.

Gabrielle Keller

Gabrielle Keller is the Swiss Abroad Editor-in-Chief of the Swiss Review. She is a Swiss national and has been living in the United States for 15 years. She has a degree in English literature and has written for various Swiss and international publications. She is currently working on a book about Swiss Abroad and their political participation.

Translated from German.



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Following Swissair's "grounding", the survival of Swiss is by no means assured. The Swiss airline industry faces a turbulent future.



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