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Vote électronique: Progress report

"Vote électronique" refers to participation in elections and referenda by voting over the Internet, as well as the electronic signature of initiatives and referenda: in other words, e-voting or the exercising of political rights via electronic media. For several years a working group set up by the Federal Chancellery has been devoted to evaluating the feasibility of Vote électronique in Switzerland.

Background

In August 2000 the Federal Council asked the Federal Chancellery to examine the feasibility of electronic voting in Switzerland. Vote électronique (VE), the working group set up to perform this task, is responsible for analysing the opportunities and risks of VE, developing and evaluating initial solutions, and providing expert support in pilot trials to test this voting medium.

In a first report on VE, the Federal Council weighed up the opportunities and risks of this voting method. It also recommended that pilot trials be held to determine the feasibility of VE. Parliament approved these plans in the summer of 2002.

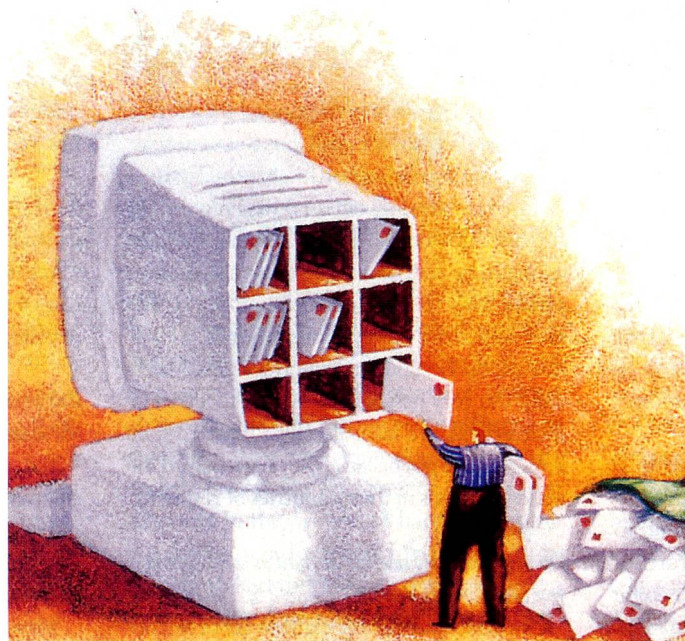
Also in 2002 the working group formulated the legal framework for these pilot trials. These regulations have been in force since 1 January 2003, and allow the Federal Council, with the approval of interested cantons, to hold e-voting pilot trials restricted to defined areas, dates and topics.

The Federal Council has signed agreements with three cantons (Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich) that lay down precise provisions governing such pilot projects. Consent by the Federal Council to pilot trials is subject to the provision that entitlement to vote is controlled and that voting secrecy and the registration of all votes is guaranteed. Furthermore, it must be possible

to exclude any misuse of the electronic voting procedure. Any system developed by the pilot cantons must be tested at least once on the occasion of a federal referendum. The pilot phase lasted until the end of 2005.

Pilot trials

The first pilot trial by the canton of Geneva in 2003 attracted major national and international media attention. The subject of the trial was a vote in the community of Anières. Following tests in other communities, VE was used on an experimental basis for two federal referenda in September 2004 (four communities) and November 2004 (eight communities). The outcome was a resounding success.



The pilot canton of Neuchâtel used VE for the federal referendum of 25 September 2005. Voters in the canton of Neuchâtel were also permitted to vote over the Internet for the federal referendum of 27 November 2005. Voting was accomplished without a hitch.

The canton of Zurich tested VE in a community referendum on 30 October 2005 in the town of Bülach. For the first time in Swiss history, voters were able to vote not only over the Internet but also by text message (SMS).

And for the federal referendum of 27 November 2005, the canton of Zurich also offered voters in three communities the choice of casting their vote online or from their mobile phone. These tests, too, proved problem-free.

Outlook

The working group plans to draw up a report on completion of the pilot phase in mid-2006. Based on this evaluation, the Federal Council and the Swiss Parliament will decide whether VE should be further pursued as an additional voting option. However, it could be many years until the relevant law is in place and put into practice.

Swiss at home and abroad will therefore need to be patient. There is no doubt that Swiss

of Swiss Abroad to be centralised in one location per canton (cantonal administration or capital city administration).

Given the way the electoral register for Swiss Abroad entitled to vote in Swiss cantons is organised at present, there are only seven cantons where VE could be introduced for Swiss Abroad: Lucerne, Basle City, Appenzell-Innerrhoden, St. Gallen, Vaud, Neuchâtel and Geneva. Only these cantons operate a more or less centralised electoral register for Swiss Abroad.

Since organisation of the electoral register is the responsibility of the individual cantons, Article 5 of the Federal Law on the Political Rights of Swiss Abroad needs to be revised so as to oblige the cantons to set up a central electoral register for Swiss Abroad. However, this can only be done if all cantons vote in favour of such a procedure. Cantonal centralisation of a Swiss Abroad electoral register is the only way to create the necessary basis for enabling the electronic participation of Swiss Abroad in referenda and elections. In addition, the 26 cantonal centres are in a better position to provide the requisite infrastructure than the 2800 or so Swiss communities, some of which have fewer than 100 residents.

In 2004 a proposal to reform the law accordingly, along with another proposal, the draft law on introduction of the general people's initiative, was submitted for consultation purposes to cantons, parties and interested associations. In 2005 the Federal Chancellery evaluated the consultation process. The findings indicate that not all cantons are in favour of plans to harmonise the electoral register for Swiss Abroad on a cantonal basis. Six cantons have reservations. The proposal is currently being revised by the Federal Chancellery and will be submitted to the Federal Council and parliament in 2006 – once more along with the federal law on introduction of the general people's initiative

Abroad would benefit most from the introduction of VE. Online voting would save a great deal of time, but from a technical standpoint Swiss Abroad voters are the most difficult to integrate into VE: they live all over the world and are entitled to vote in different communities around Switzerland.

Centralised electoral register required

If VE is to be made available to all Swiss Abroad voters, it is essential for the electoral register



and the evaluation report on pilot trials.

Summary

The prognosis that VE can only be introduced for Swiss Abroad by 2010 at the earliest remains valid. Reorganisation of the electoral register must not only be politically accepted, but also technically feasible. With our federalistic structures, all this – and political acceptance in particular – takes time!

You can find more information on the Vote électronique project at:

www.admin.ch/ch/d/egov/

Changes in the Swiss representation network

The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs has announced the following restructuring measures for various Swiss representations.

The Consulate General in Amsterdam will be changed to an honorary consulate. It was closed at the end of November 2005, since when the embassy in Den Haag has been responsible for official business.

The Consulate General in Houston will close on 30 June 2006. Official business will be transferred to the representations in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Chicago.

The Consulate General in Las Palmas will also close on 30 June 2006, with official business being transferred to Madrid. Honorary consuls will be appointed both for Houston and Las Palmas.

The honorary consulate in Edinburgh will be changed to a professional Consulate General with effect from the beginning of 2006. At the same time, the Consulate General in Manchester will be changed to an honorary consulate by 30 June 2006. The embassy in London will now be responsible for offi-

cial business. The Consulate General in Melbourne is to be closed in October 2006, with official business being transferred to Sydney. On the same date the Consulate General in Dresden will be closed, with official business being transferred to Berlin. There are plans to appoint an honorary consul for Dresden.

In China, a third General Consulate in addition to those in Shanghai and Hong Kong is to be opened in Guangzhou (Canton) in the course of this year.

New AHV number
From 2008, the existing AHV (social security) number is to be replaced by a new number. While the existing system has proved its worth, it no longer meets all requirements.

Soon the current AHV numbering system will no longer be capable of assigning a number to every insured person. Furthermore, the current AHV numbers contain information which can be decoded. Every group of digits has a meaning. For instance, information about the date of birth (day, month and year), sex, surname initial group and nationality (Swiss or foreign national) can be deduced from the numbers. The current AHV number is also used outside the AHV field, and is often used for busi-

ness and private applications. In short: The existing AHV number system no longer complies with current regulations on data protection.

For this reason, from 2008 the existing 11-digit AHV number will be replaced by a 13-digit number which cannot reveal information on the insured persons. In future, the number will be used as a social security number by all federally regulated social insurances.

Insured persons do not need to take any action ahead of introduction of the new AHV number, as they will be notified by the AHV, IV or their employer. The compensation offices are the point of contact for insured persons. The point of contact for Swiss Abroad is the Swiss Compensation Office in Geneva.

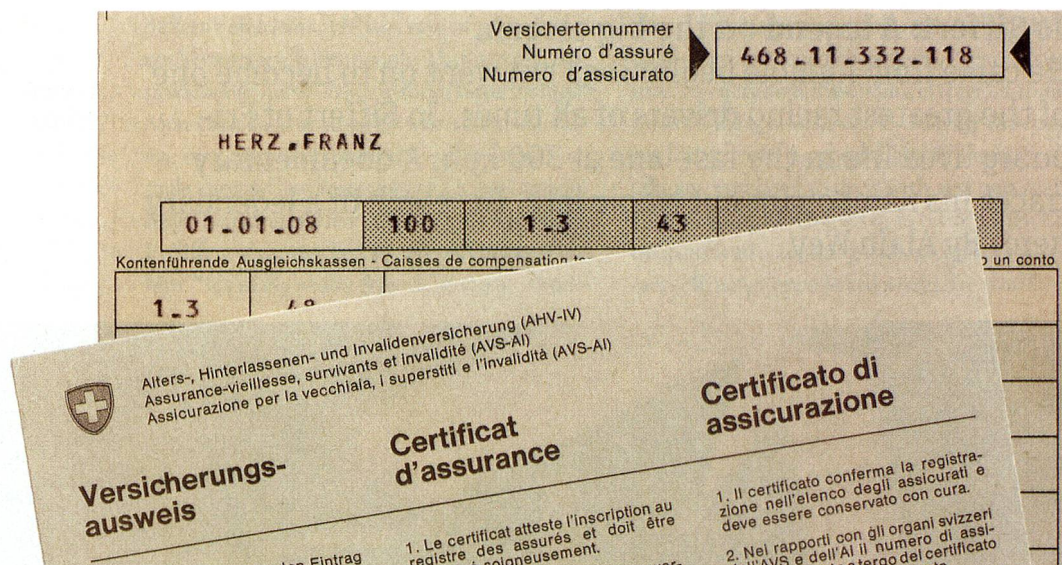
Additional information:
www.bsv.admin.ch
www.ahv-iv.info, "NNSS – Neu AHV-Nummer"

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PEOPLE'S INITIATIVES

The following people's initiatives are available for signature:

- "For a flexible retirement age" (until 21 December 2006)
- "Living Water (Renaturation Initiative)" (until 4 July 2006)
- "Associations' right of appeal: For an end to obstructionist policy – more growth for Switzerland!" (until 16 May 2006)

Signature forms for pending initiatives can be downloaded from www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/vi/vis10.html.

VOTING:

Federal Referendum of 21 May 2006

- Federal decision of 16 December 2005 on the amendment of the constitutional articles governing education