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E-voting at the 2011 elections

Following the 2011 elections, the Selects election research project included the Swiss abroad in its survey for the first time. In the following article, Georg Lutz, Head of the Selects project and Professor at the University of Lausanne, explains the main findings on e-voting.

Pilot trials for online voting have been taking place for several years now in Switzerland, but 2011 saw the first e-voting trials held for National Council elections. This is important for the Swiss abroad because the time required to complete and return ballot slips by post is often very short and, in many cases, makes it impossible for them to cast their vote. The OSCE Election Assessment Mission, which observed the 2011 elections in Switzerland, also criticised the short time frames (details can be found at <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/Switzerland/81974>).

Implementing an e-voting system is a complex undertaking. The process must guarantee voting secrecy and provide the best possible safeguards against errors, misuse and manipulation. Added to this, it must make it easy for voters to cast their votes. It is difficult to meet all these requirements optimally at the same time: the more comprehensive the security measures, the more complicated the voting procedure.

Higher turnout with e-voting

Whether e-voting has a positive impact on turnout and how high acceptance is among voters can be determined from the survey on the 2011 elections. Sixteen percent of respondents said they were able to vote online, 71% said they were unable, and 13% said they did not know. Those who had the opportunity to vote electronically said they also used this option frequently. Almost three quarters said they had cast their vote electronically. Moreover, the vast majority of those who were unable to vote online said they would use e-voting if they had the opportunity. Among the non-voters, almost all said they would have cast their vote had they had the opportunity to vote online. This may be an exaggeration



on their part, but it shows a definite interest in electronic voting among our compatriots abroad.

The key question, however, is whether the possibility of voting electronically did actually increase the turnout. At around 30%, the turnout for Swiss abroad entered on the electoral roll is well below the turnout of around 50% for the electorate as a whole. The survey revealed that, at 41%, the turnout among those who were able to cast their vote electronically is significantly higher than among those who said they were unable to vote electronically (31%). For those who did not know whether they were able to vote electronically, the turnout was only 16%.

Acceptance of e-voting

For all voting systems, what matters is not just how secure they are but also the extent to which they are accepted. There is no such thing as a faultless method, and most voters (in Switzerland and abroad) have virtually no knowledge of how a voting system actually works. For example, very few know how secrecy is guaranteed for postal voting and how postal votes are counted. But since more than 80% of voters now send their votes by post, we can only assume that most do not view this as a problem.

The survey also revealed how important various aspects of e-voting are and which aspects gave the respondents cause for concern. They all appreciated the fact that an electronic vote would be received in good time and that the votes would be counted correctly. Many of the respondents also said it was much easier to cast their vote electronically at home. On the other hand, the novelty value – in other words, curiosity about the new method – played virtually no role. Some 40% of respondents were worried about possible

errors in transmitting and counting the votes, and one third questioned the security of the new technology. A lack of Internet skills and the complexity of the voting procedure were not really regarded as a problem.

Conclusions

E-voting is expected to have a positive impact on the turnout of Swiss voters abroad. The percentage of Swiss abroad who exercise their right to vote tends to be lower than that of voters in Switzerland: campaigns are less high-profile abroad than in Switzerland. However, the gap between the turnout rates is expected to become narrower.

It is hardly surprising that the community of the Swiss abroad enthusiastically welcomes the universal introduction of e-voting. The stumbling block remains the security of the system. This is where respondents voiced their greatest concerns. Yet these concerns should not be exaggerated and give rise to excessively complex systems. More than a decade ago, concerns were also being voiced about the simplified postal voting system. Today, this rarely attracts criticism, even though postal voting in some isolated cases falls foul of errors and manipulation. E-voting is therefore likely to become more widely accepted as soon as this option has been introduced across the board.

GEORG LUTZ

SWISS ABROAD SURVEYED

For the first time and with support from the FDFA, the Selects project also surveyed the Swiss abroad after the elections. Some 7,000 voters were contacted and 1,629 (23%) took part in the survey. The survey was conducted online using a questionnaire designed especially for the community of the Swiss abroad. Further information is provided in the following publication in German: Georg Lutz, Eidgenössische Wahlen 2011. Wahlteilnahme und Wahlentscheid. Selects-FORS: Lausanne (2012); available online at www.selects.ch.