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Electronic voting – the long road to the digitalisation of political rights

Federal government and the cantons have been driving forward the introduction of electronic voting for over 10 years. Significant milestones have been achieved – there is nevertheless a long way to go on the road to the complete digitalisation of political rights, and various challenges have to be faced. These can only be overcome in dialogue with all parties concerned.

The project to introduce electronic voting reached a new key stage at the federal ballot on 8 March 2015. Second-generation systems were deployed for the first time. First-generation systems were upgraded to ensure individual verifiability. This allows eligible voters to check that their vote has been sent correctly, which, in turn, enables voters to identify any manipulation carried out on their device or on the internet.

The use of the new systems for the first time was not the only novelty at the ballot in March. The canton of Glarus provided its eligible Swiss citizens abroad with the opportunity to vote electronically for the first time. The canton of Zurich resumed trials with electronic voting after their suspension in 2011.

Thanks to the introduction of electronic voting in the two cantons, around 100,000 of the 142,000 eligible Swiss voters abroad registered Switzerland-wide can now take advantage of the new voting channel. Federal government and the cantons have therefore achieved the goal set in 2011 of providing the majority of eligible Swiss voters abroad with the opportunity to vote electronically by the 2015 elections.

Using new technologies with caution

The new technologies are being used carefully in the field of political rights. Security represents the major challenge for federal government and the cantons with regard to the digitalisation of political rights. The introduction of electronic voting is therefore being driven forward based on an ethos of security over speed.

In Switzerland, the authorities responsible for elections and referendum have the trust of the Swiss people. However, this positive environment cannot simply be taken for granted. The new technologies aim to make the instruments of direct democracy fit for the

future. The requirements of an increasingly mobile society need to be taken into account. At the same time, the new technologies should not be allowed to undermine the credibility of the institutions and the effectiveness of democracy.

It is in light of this situation that the Federal Council defined its strategy for the expansion of electronic voting in 2013. Only once the cantons have implemented the new, even more rigorous security requirements can they make an application to the Federal Council to increase the existing limits regarding the domestic electorate.

The introduction remains controversial

Significant milestones have been reached in the introduction of the third complementary method of voting over recent years. Opinion on these developments is nevertheless deeply divided. While some believe that the electronic voting project should be driven forward even more rapidly, others contend that democracy is being jeopardised and are calling for the immediate abandonment of the project.

The debate over electronic voting is not just being conducted in the public sphere and in the media. Politicians are also addressing the issue. Three procedural requests on electronic voting were submitted during the 2015 spring session of the Federal Assembly alone. Questions were asked by Maximilian Reimann (SVP) and Carlo Sommaruga (SP), while Lukas Reimann (SVP) submitted a parliamentary initiative. Christophe Darbellay (CVP) put forward a motion during the special session in mid-May and Christian Levrat (SP) an interpellation during the summer session.

The debate shows that the project to digitalise political rights touches upon key aspects of our co-existence – democracy and the structure of its underlying instruments. Concerns and fears should be taken seriously and dialogue with sceptics and critics should be encouraged. Only open and constructive cooperation with all groups can establish the trust required in order to drive forward the digi-



talisation of political rights and strengthen the tools of democracy over the long term. Federal government and the cantons are working towards this goal.

Facts and figures about the use of electronic voting

Fourteen cantons currently offer electronic voting. In total, around 194,000 eligible voters can vote electronically. The cantons of Geneva and Neuchâtel are including eligible voters living in the canton in their electronic voting trials as well as their Swiss citizens abroad. The other 12 cantons (Zurich, Berne, Lucerne, Glarus, Fribourg, Solothurn, Basel-Stadt, Schaffhausen, St. Gallen, Grisons, Aargau and Thurgau) restrict themselves to their Swiss Abroad.

A wide range of information about the project can be found on the Federal Chancellery's website (www.bk.admin.ch > Topics > Political rights > E-Voting). This includes the conditions for using electronic voting and the figures on turnout at ballots using the electronic voting system.

National Council elections with electronic voting

Thirteen cantons intend to offer electronic voting at the National Council elections on 18 October 2015. The use of electronic voting at the 2015 National Council elections has to be approved by the Federal Council. A decision is expected in summer 2015. Full information on the elections and the use of the new voting system can be found on the election website of the Federal Chancellery and Parliamentary Services www.ch.ch/wahlen2015.

NADJA OBRESCHKOW AND GEO TAGLIONI, FEDERAL CHANCELLERY

New Federal Chancellery brochure on electronic voting

The Federal Chancellery has published a new brochure on the electronic voting project. The new publication focuses on the Federal Council's strategy for introducing and extending the electronic voting system. The 2006 to 2012 trial period is evaluated and the new security requirements explained. The project is also briefly detailed and the status of implementation in the individual cantons outlined. Objectives and key milestones are also set out. The Federal Chancellery's new brochure on the electronic voting project is available in German, French and Italian and can be downloaded from the Federal Chancellery's website.



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Popular initiatives

The following new federal popular initiatives had been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- "Zersiedelung stoppen – für eine nachhaltige Siedlungsentwicklung (Zersiedelungsinitiative)" – (Stop urban sprawl – for sustainable residential development (urban sprawl initiative)) – (21.10.2016)
- "Für verantwortungsvolle Unternehmen – zum Schutz von Mensch und Umwelt" – (For corporate responsibility – for the protection of people and the environment) – (21.10.2016)

The list of pending popular initiatives can be found at www.bk.admin.ch under Aktuell > Wahlen und Abstimmungen > Hängige Volksinitiativen.

HELPLINE FDFA

Phone from Switzerland: 0800 24-7-365
Phone from abroad: +41 800 24-7-365
E-Mail: helpline@eda.admin.ch
Skype: helpline-eda

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FDFA Official Communications Officer:
Peter Zimmerli, Relations with the Swiss Abroad
Bundesgasse 32, 3003 Berne, Switzerland
Tel. +41 800 24 7 365
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