

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 46 (2019)
Heft: 4

Artikel: E-voting encounters a headwind
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907172>

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E-voting encounters a headwind

Electronic voting is important for Swiss Abroad. However, concerns about the digital voting channel are growing in Switzerland.

SUSANNE WENGER

This way of voting opens the door to manipulation, said the sceptics. Not to mention the possible negative effects on the democratic process. The opposite is the case, responded the supporters: the new voting channel makes it easier to take part and will increase voter turnout. These arguments did not come from the current debate on e-voting. They are from 25 years ago. At that time, Switzerland introduced voting by mail. In the meantime, this process has become established: 80 to 90 per cent of voters still use it. Only a minority venture out to their local polling booth in person to put their completed ballot paper in the ballot box.

The arguments about a third channel – computer voting – are just as passionate now. Electronic voting is of particular concern for the “Fifth Switzerland” in particular. 174,000 Swiss abroad are currently registered on the electoral roll. In its petition submitted in 2018, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) demanded that they all have access to e-voting by 2021. Preparations have already been underway in the Federal Government and in the cantons for fifteen years. Until recently, it was possible to vote with the click of a mouse in ten cantons. But only a test mode is permitted at present, and it is also temporary, which the “Swiss Review” discovered shortly before going to print. The Federal Council has currently shelved its original plan for a law change that could have introduced e-voting for all eligible voters in Switzerland and abroad. The growing concerns among the political parties are the reason for the policy change. And several developments have seen the discussion become quite heated recently.

Safety before speed

The advantages of e-voting are obvious to the government: Swiss abroad can safely take part in voting and elections; and voters with a disability can submit their vote themselves. However, the sceptics and some of the proponents of e-voting believe that the system, security and financial questions must be clarified beforehand.

It is concerning that the pioneer canton of Geneva stopped using its independently developed e-voting system due to cost considerations. Six cantons did use it. Now they need to find another solution. Moreover, with the pro-



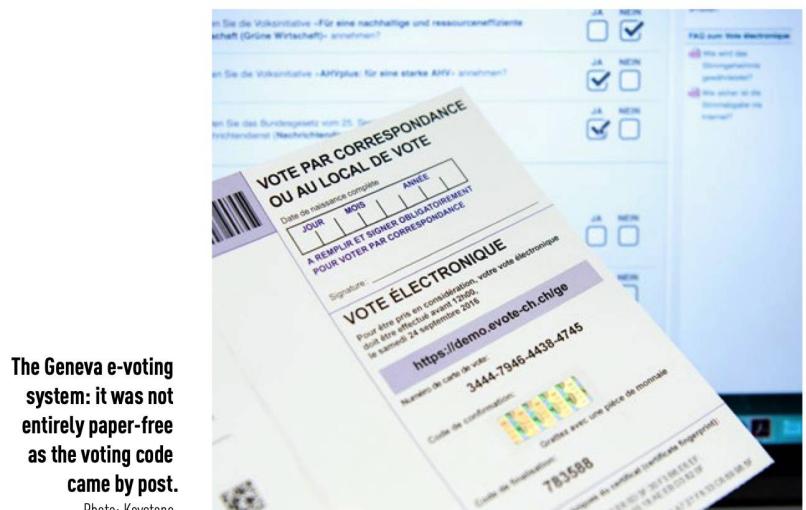
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ject being abandoned in Geneva, the last state provider disappears. However, even many supporters of e-voting believe that it should be in state hands. This demand has not been fulfilled by the only remaining e-voting system of the Swiss Post. It is programmed by a Spanish company, among others. The Swiss Post’s system was also withdrawn from service for the voting on 19 May. External experts discovered security weaknesses during testing.

“Risk for democracy”

Now various parties are requesting that the process be stopped for now. Since spring, a broad alliance made up of the left-wing Greens through to the right-wing conservative Swiss People’s Party (SVP) has been collecting signatures for a popular initiative. They want to ban e-voting for five years. According to the text of the initiative, a later introduction would be possible but only with strict technical requirements. It is not only a matter of guaranteeing the same level of protection from manipulation as with the handwritten procedure. The initiators are also demanding that voters be able to monitor the major steps of electronic voting “without the need for any particular expertise”.

“Everyone understands ballot box and postal voting,” says the Lucerne Young Liberal Nicolas Rimoldi, Campaign Head of the Initiative, “however, e-voting is only understood by a few specialists”. This is undemocratic, Rimoldi says. He is a fan of digitalisation, however, the issue in ques-



The Geneva e-voting system: it was not entirely paper-free as the voting code came by post.

Photo: Keystone



tion is the most precious commodity of all: democracy. In this case, Switzerland cannot be too careful: "E-voting constitutes an unprecedented risk to security and trust for our direct democracy," he says. To strengthen the political participation of the "Fifth Switzerland", Rimoldi recommends solutions such as decentralised voting at the embassies. Or electronic dispatch of the voting papers, which is being demanded by his co-initiator and SVP National Councillor Claudio Zanetti (ZH).

"E-dispatch" instead of e-voting?

Zanetti is a vehement opponent of e-voting, and at the same time a member of the Council of the Swiss Abroad. He acknowledges: "For many Swiss Abroad, the inadequate postal services in their countries of residence do not make it easy for them to exercise their right to vote. With "e-dispatch", the post could at least be circumvented in one direction, says Zanetti. On the other hand, Liberal

The defects uncovered in Swiss Post's e-voting system are a bitter setback for the digital voting channel.
Photo: Keystone

National Councillor Doris Fiala (ZH) fundamentally supports e-voting. "E-voting would be an enormous improvement and far easier for voters living abroad," says Fiala, who is a member of the Swiss Abroad parliamentary group.

It makes absolute sense to "bring democracy into the 21st century", says Fiala. The population is using digital services more often in their daily life. However, e-voting presents some of the most complex IT problems for the developers: "On the one hand, every vote must be counted correctly; on the other hand, voting secrecy must still be guaranteed." The national councillor deems the weaknesses detected in the system of Swiss Post "considerable". She also advised against a revision of the law at this stage: "The issue is trust," she says.

More than just technology

It is interesting to note that age or attitude towards digitalisation do not determine whether people are for or against e-voting. There are many IT experts among its opponents. The usual left-right divide does not feature either. It has to do with the dimensions of the topic, explains observer Adrienne Fichter, a tech journalist at the online magazine "Republik": "With the advent of e-voting, there is political discussion about digital technology for the first time." Even if similar arguments came up during postal voting, e-voting is more about the fact that "an insider can manipulate ten thousand votes without being detected". This was shown during the security testing of Swiss Post's system. Fichter, author of the book "Smartphone-Demokratie" [Smartphone Democracy] welcomes the resulting debate as the beginning of an "enlightening discourse" on the opportunities and risks of digital democracy. It is high time that other countries saw Switzerland as an example, she says.

Is e-voting still something for the future? The security aspects are also important to the Swiss abroad, emphasises OSA Director Ariane Rustichelli: "As the project coordinator, the Federal Chancellery is responsible for e-voting." For Swiss voters living abroad, one thing counts above all: that they can exercise their political rights.

Online voting?

The National Council and Council of States' elections will take place in Switzerland on 20 October. By the time the "Swiss Review" went to press, it was still unclear whether the cantons will be allowed to offer electronic voting. The Federal Council will decide in August. The cantons must submit separate applications for the elections. The permit that they have for the e-voting test mode does not automatically apply for all votes. During the last national elections in 2015, four cantons offered Internet voting.

(SWE)