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“E-voting and e-banking are not the same thing”

E-voting in Switzerland has been on hold since last summer – leaving many Swiss Abroad disappointed. Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr gives us his take on the matter, reiterating the importance of “security before speed”.

INTERVIEW: MARC LETTAU, SUSANNE WENGER

Swiss Review: Tell us, Mr Thurnherr – have you ever missed a voting date?

Walter Thurnherr: I have not missed one yet, as far as I know. I always vote by post because it is quick and very practical – unless you are visually impaired or live abroad.

Would you be worried if voter turnout in Switzerland fell by a third?

Voter turnout is already under 50 per cent, meaning that only around one quarter of the population decides on everything. That concerns me for a start.

But this is exactly what we saw in the 2019 National Council elections: a sharp decline in turnout. The number of people voting from abroad plummeted in some instances.

Although this was probably because the electronic voting channel was unavailable. We could correct that. In my view, it would be worse if voters lost interest in voting and no one knew why.

Since e-voting was put on ice, we in the editorial team have received an increasing number of letters from disaffected expats. Can you understand this reaction?

Yes, of course. Especially from those who previously had access to e-voting and had got used to it. It is particularly annoying for people who are only out of the country for a relatively short time and will be returning to Switzerland later – because they will be directly affected by the voting outcomes.

They say that e-voting in Switzerland is currently on hold, but isn't it clinically dead?

On hold means exactly that. But the issue cannot be resolved in a couple of days. No one can say yet how things will turn out. It depends on various factors. E-voting opponents are collecting signatures for a popular initiative calling for a moratorium. Various motions are pending in parliament. It is also about whether we have an operator that can provide a secure system.

Are you optimistic?

Good question! Four years ago, the Council of States only narrowly rejected a motion calling on the federal govern-



Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr on the prospects for e-voting: “Sometimes I am optimistic, sometimes less so.” Photos: Danielle Liniger

ment to force the cantons into offering e-voting by the 2019 elections. We were already saying back then that security takes priority over speed, stressing the importance of cantonal autonomy. Consultations on e-voting later revealed that almost all cantons welcomed e-voting. Most

of the political parties thought differently, however. Then we had the attempt by Swiss Post to roll out a fully verifiable e-voting system. Testing showed up a number of serious and even quite embarrassing flaws, so Swiss Post eventually decided to pull the existing system. We have also seen a general change in attitudes.

How do you mean?

Whereas 15 years ago we were saying that the Internet was very good for democracies and bad for dictatorships, it now tends to be the other way around. Everyone is very wary now due to all the factors and arguments that have been documented. But I am sure that if two or three cantons had a fully verifiable system in place, then neighbouring cantons would immediately wonder about whether they can follow suit. This is often how things work in Switzerland.

Berne has been sending mixed signals on e-voting. On the one hand we have you, the Federal Chancellor, in charge of drawing up a new e-voting testing process by the end of the year in consultation with the cantons. On the other, we see growing pressure from parliament to abandon e-voting. What are you supposed to think if you are a Swiss living in, say, Sydney or Ouagadougou?

Anyone who stays informed will know what is happening in Switzerland, regardless of whether they live in Sydney or Ouagadougou. Swiss politics is all about consultation and consensus – sometimes it is hard to see the wood for the trees. You go one step forward, then two steps back. Things need time. Let us not forget either that with postal voting the discussions began in the 1930s. We introduced it nationwide in 1994. Ticino actually only introduced it for cantonal ballots a few years ago.

Last summer, the Federal Council decided against rolling out e-voting throughout Switzerland. It wants a new testing process to be carried out instead. But pilots have been ongoing in several cantons since 2004.

We wanted to go one step further than before and test a system that is fully verifiable. Only when we have such a system will we roll out e-voting more widely. Unfortunately, the Swiss Post system had flaws. The new testing process that we have announced is about getting to the next stage. It is about moving forward, slowly but surely.

E-voting has mainly come under fire owing to security concerns. Will e-voting ever be secure?

Security can never be completely watertight. Any electronic process can be hacked or corrupted. However, the sa-



Thurnherr: "I understand the frustration of those who feel disenfranchised."

feguards that we are putting in place mean that any attempt to hack would, firstly, require an inordinate amount of time and effort, and, secondly, not go unnoticed. The aim is to ensure the highest possible level of safety as we do with aircraft or nuclear power plants. Strictly speaking, if you are looking for absolute safety you should never board an aeroplane.

Many voters in the "Fifth Switzerland" think that the security concerns are misplaced. They can use e-banking and access e-government services, where the level of risk is considered acceptable.

Why not e-voting?

E-banking and e-voting are not the same thing. Whereas e-banking consists of individual client-server interactions, e-voting relates to an entire system. Any damage would be far greater. Even the mere suspicion of votes being hacked is bad for the credibility of our democratic system. Hence, we hold e-voting to much higher security standards than any other electronic system. This has

made us less than popular among potential system providers.

Postal voting is popular, but that can be manipulated as well. And several thousand postal votes are rendered invalid each time, because voters failed to sign their ballot papers, for example.

Your comparison is a bit too simplistic. You can manipulate postal votes here and there, but rarely on a large scale. The concern with e-voting is that someone could hack into the server and change the entire outcome of the vote. Critics are right to say that we should remain wary when it comes to our democratic processes. We therefore have to explain to people what we are doing to make e-voting as secure as possible.

Aren't there any alternatives to e-voting that would enable Swiss Abroad to exercise their legal right to vote? What about sending voting papers electronically?

E-dispatch is not a good idea in my view. It is certainly less secure than a fully verifiable e-voting system. And it would only be of use to Swiss Abroad whose post is too slow for sending voting papers both ways but quick enough for sending them one way. E-voting was not only meant as an innovation for expats, as you know. Through e-voting, we can finally ensure voter secrecy for Switzerland's 350,000 blind or partially sighted people. E-dispatch is no use to them.

Then what about keeping things simple and voting at an embassy instead?

When I used to live in Moscow, I was able to hand my voting envelope to the diplomatic courier. But that is not an option if you live in Vladivostok or Irkutsk. You would have to fly to Moscow each time you wanted to cast your vote. Another thing that has been suggested is nominating a proxy in Switzerland who will receive your ballot paper and fill it in according to how you want to vote. But you cannot vote in secret that way. Would the Swiss Abroad really want that? Of course, we are always open to making improvements. For example, we extended the deadline for returning voting papers by one week. We could also start to think about alternatives if e-voting was ever ditched for good.

Could a dedicated constituency for the "Fifth Switzerland" be another alternative?

You would need to change the constitution for that. We have 760,000 Swiss who live abroad. Anyone can launch



"Security can never be completely watertight," Thurnherr tells "Swiss Review".

a popular initiative if they want to. But that won't solve the problem of voting papers not arriving in time, I am afraid.

The complaints from the "Fifth Switzerland" are probably less to do with voting and more to do with the feeling that they are being treated unfairly. Essentially, the problem is that not all Swiss can actually exercise their voting rights to the full.

I understand the frustration of those who feel disenfranchised. However, postal voting was introduced with the caveat that there is no guarantee of voting papers arriving on time. I remember because I used to be head of the Service for the Swiss Abroad at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. We cannot repeat the vote if the Brazilian post office fails to deliver the voting envelopes on time. Nevertheless, we do have a very democratic voting system here in Switzerland. Our expatriate communities continue to have political rights, even though some expatriates have been based abroad for generations. Maybe that is worth mentioning too.

Walter Thurnherr has been the Federal Chancellor since 2016. He is the most senior official responsible for federal elections and votes. Thurnherr, who was born in Aargau and studied physics, has served in various positions within the Federal Administration and the diplomatic service, involving assignments in Moscow and New York.