

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 50 (2023)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Finally - a fresh attempt at e-voting
Autor: Rutz, Eveline
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051806>

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Finally – a fresh attempt at e-voting

The cantons of Basel-Stadt, St Gallen and Thurgau are to launch new e-voting pilots in June. If these trials go well, the new system could be used in the national elections in autumn.

EVELINE RUTZ

The digital ballot box is set to make its Swiss comeback on 18 June, when the cantons of Basel-Stadt, St Gallen and Thurgau are to pilot e-voting, enabling up to 65,000 people to vote online – including Swiss Abroad. The Federal Council has given the three cantons the green light to conduct a limited trial. Grisons intends to start its own pilot in 2024.

Shortcomings have been rectified

The risks are at an acceptable level, Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr told the media in March. “E-voting systems incorporate effective anti-fraud mechanisms. Any attempts to hack them can be detected with a high degree of certainty.”

Swiss Post now meets the high security standards necessary for online voting, having made significant improvements since 2019, when e-voting was discontinued (see “Swiss Review”, April 2021 and August 2022). Since 2021, hackers around the world have been invited to put the solution through its paces. The Swiss Post system is continually monitored by independent experts and is fully verifiable. This means that anyone who votes online can check whether their vote has been registered correctly. The pilot itself will help to improve e-voting, stressed Thurnherr. “Certain findings are only possible once you put a system into practice.”

The cantons are delighted to be offering e-voting again on a trial basis. After over 300 successful tests, we are picking up where we left off in 2019, says Barbara Schüpbach-Guggenbühl, Chancellor of the canton of Basel-Stadt, adding that they are responding to a significant need among Swiss Abroad and among voters with physical and/or mental impairments.

“A digital means of voting is vital for these people to be able to exercise their democratic rights effectively.”

The pilots entail considerable preparation and costs for the cantons involved. But Schüpbach-Guggenbühl firmly believes the time and expense will pay off. Switzerland’s federal system must future-proof itself to maintain current levels of political participation. “Government stakeholders need to offer added value to ensure that people engage with democracy, now and in the future.”

Postal delivery of security codes to continue

Not all of the pilot will be digital in nature, because the selected participants will receive their individual security codes – together with the usual voting papers – by post. This is relevant to Swiss Abroad, who have to wait longer for their papers to arrive. But online voting foregoes the need to return everything by post, enabling expats to cast their vote in just a few clicks. The introduction of an e-ID scheme could simplify the process in future, with e-voting function-

The risks associated with the new e-voting system are at an acceptable level, says Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr. Any attempts to hack the system would, in all likelihood, be detected.
Photo: Keystone



ing seamlessly on a purely electronic basis without the need to use postal delivery at all.

Swiss Post is responding to the digital revolution, says its spokeswoman Silvana Grellmann. “We want to bring the secrecy of correspondence into the virtual world.” Switzerland’s national postal service employs over 1,700 people in its IT department. At its Neuchâtel site, it has set up a cryptography hub currently comprising 47 staff. Grellmann: “Security is a never-ending process.” Swiss Post will continue to use the “collective intelligence of experts” to iron out glitches. It will also be transparent in reporting vulnerabilities, with the aim of building public trust in the e-voting system.

If the 18 June pilots are successful, the cantons could offer e-voting in autumn’s federal elections. They would first have to submit an application to the federal government.

The “Fifth Switzerland” wants to exercise its political rights

This is positive news for the “Fifth Switzerland”, according to Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA). The Swiss are increasingly mobile, she says, with more expats – currently some 220,000 – listed in the voting register every year. People also tend to be staying abroad for shorter periods of time on average, so it is all the more important that Swiss Abroad are able to participate in the democratic process. “E-voting helps them to maintain the link with home.” Rustichelli hopes that the pilots are a success. “Then we can resume trials in other cantons.”