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Online guidance for voters ahead of the federal elections

The federal elections on 22 October will again see thousands of candidates contesting the 246 seats in parliament. With so many politicians to choose from, it can be hard to see the wood for the trees. Online platforms like Smartvote help you to make an informed decision.

THEODORA PETER

The actual number of men and women standing for election will become clear in August, when the deadline for nominations expires in Switzerland's 26 cantons. The current record number of candidates, set in 2019, could well be broken this year. The last federal elections saw more than 4,600 candidates fighting over 200 seats in the National Council, while more than 200 people stood for the 46 seats available in the Council of States.

Voters, for their part, can expect to receive a large envelope through the post this autumn. This item will not only include the relevant election lists but also numerous campaign leaflets. So much election literature can be slightly daunting.

Cantonal variation

The size of the envelope will depend not least on the canton in which you are entitled to vote. The Swiss Abroad are no exception in this regard. In the two most populous cantons, Zurich and Berne, 36 and 24 National Council seats are up for grabs respectively. The quota varies between 19 and seven seats for mid-sized cantons, and between six and one for the least populous cantons. Then you have the Council of States, where candidates contest one and two seats per canton.

Even voters in smaller cantons are spoilt for choice, with party nominations still far outstripping the number of available seats. And unlike in municipal elections, when candidates are often the man or woman next door, those running for election at federal level could come from the opposite corner of the canton.

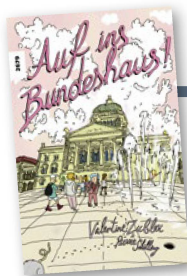
Regardless of distance, filling in a ballot paper is a democratic right that takes more than a little thought.



How do I find out which parties and candidates best represent my own political views?

Smartvote questionnaire and spider graph

If you are happy to invest a bit of time into making the right choice, you can do worse than register on Smartvote.ch – an expert-driven system that works like an online dating site. The Smartvote platform asks you to respond to a range of questions that have already been answered by the election candidates. Instead of being personal, the questions cover key issues in Swiss politics – such as pension provision, health insurance premiums, taxation, the environment, and immigration. At the end, a list of matches pops up on screen – these are the names of candidates whose policies measure up best to your own views in percentage terms. You can also view a “smartspider”: a spider graph that visualises your political preferences along eight thematic axes (see page 13 for two examples).



Federal politics for children

Around 100,000 people visit the Federal Palace in Berne every year. Many of them belong to school classes, who go on guided tours and watch the parliamentary debates live in the National Council and Council of States. In 2022, the Swiss youth literature foundation SJW published “Auf ins Bundeshaus!”/“Les souris du Palais fédéral” – an illustrated story about a girl called Melissa who smuggles her pet mouse Luna into the Federal Palace, causing no shortage of commotion. During their adventure through parliament, Melissa and Luna learn how politics works both in public and behind the scenes.

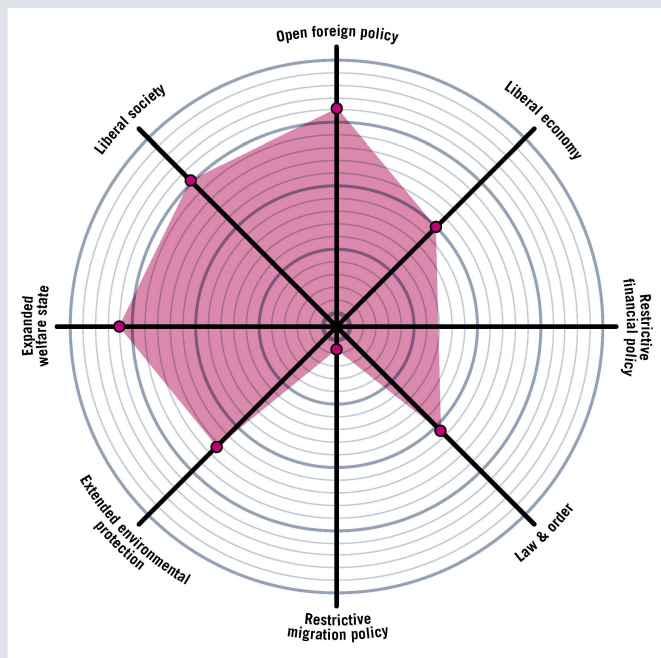
(TP)

According to Smartvote project manager Michael Erne, a reworked version of the questionnaire will be ready by the summer in time for the 2023 elections. To allow comparison with previous elections, most of the 75 questions will remain the same or just be updated. About a quarter of them will be completely new. “Themes like security, neutrality, and purchasing power have taken on greater importance in these elections due to the war in Ukraine, and because of inflation,” explains Erne. There is also more emphasis on digitalisation, which affects all areas of life.

New version online from the end of August

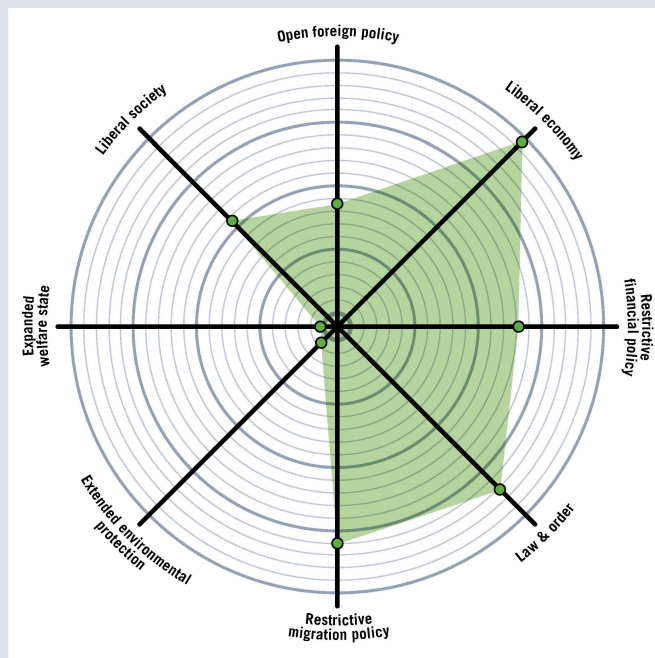
This spring, the public were able to submit their own theme-related input. A dedicated interface called “BePart” was set up for this purpose, says Erne. The platform received around 200 submissions, including questions such as “Should Switzerland allow other countries to re-export Swiss-manufactured weapons and ammunition?” and “Are you in favour of Switzerland joining the EEA?” Suggestions from the public, as well as input from politicians and academics, will be used to improve Smartvote. Following a trial period, the new questionnaire will eventually go online at the end of August. Anyone who wishes to test out the platform before then can access the online questionnaire for the 2019 national elections.

Four years ago, the platform was used by 500,000 to 600,000 voters, or 20 per cent of the total turnout at the ballot box. Smartvote is also popular among the election candidates themselves, 85 per cent of whom completed the questionnaire in the 2019 elections. It makes sense that politicians want to feature on the platform.



Left wing

The “smartspider” visualises a person’s political views and values along eight thematic axes. Candidate X in the above example wants an expanded welfare state and a liberal society. He also favours a progressive, EU-oriented foreign policy approach. In comparison, environmental issues play a somewhat less important role in his thinking. He completely disagrees with taking a more restrictive line on immigration. (TP)



Right wing

Candidate Y favours a liberal approach to economic policy, with as much deregulation and as little state intervention as possible. As the spider graph shows, she is just as keen on measures to improve law and order as she is on taking a more restrictive line on immigration. On the other hand, Candidate Y has no interest in expanding the welfare state or advocating environmental issues. (TP)

All but 15 per cent of candidates wanted to be included. According to Erne, the absentees tend to be “list fillers”, i.e. people who enter their name on the election list without expecting to be elected.

Easyvote – explanatory videos and app

easyvote.ch is another resource making it easier for people to exercise their right to vote. The umbrella organisation of Swiss youth parliaments developed easyvote.ch with the aim of encouraging political participation primarily among young people. The platform offers a good overview of forthcoming elections and popular

votes, with neutral, easy-to-understand content that will appeal to a wide range of people. For the federal elections, it has short videos explaining Switzerland’s two-chamber system and how to fill in a ballot paper correctly. There is also a dedicated app called Votenow, which is available for use on smartphone.

Ch.ch – election information from the Swiss authorities

Meanwhile, the Confederation and cantons offer www.ch.ch – a user-friendly one-stop shop of continually updated information on the federal elections. The site includes an election calendar, an overview of the

rules on standing for election and the rules on transparency around political funding, as well as an election glossary explaining technical terms such as “multiple candidacy” and “party vote”. In addition, the platform contains information on what to do if you are a Swiss Abroad and want to exercise your political rights in the elections.

www.smartvote.ch
www.easyvote.ch
www.ch.ch/de/wahlen2023/
www.elections-2023.ch