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# Switzerland's champion voters

Schaffhausen, the most northerly canton in Switzerland, consistently boasts the highest turnout in national elections and popular votes. It is also the only canton where voting is mandatory. But this is not the only reason why people there are so keen to go to the polls.

SUSANNE WENGER

Shortly before arriving in the town of Schaffhausen, we catch a glimpse of the majestic Rhine Falls from the window of our train – a huge torrent of water thundering over the cliffs. This natural wonder and national attraction is Schaffhausen's calling card. The 86,000 people who live in the canton of Schaffhausen have a different claim to fame, albeit one much less well known: nowhere else in Switzerland is voter turnout so high, surpassing the national average by 15 to 20 percentage points for elections and popular votes at federal level.

For example, the three federal votes of 2022 saw an average voter turnout in Schaffhausen of 66 per cent, compared to a paltry 45 per cent across Switzerland. Some 60 per cent of the Schaffhausen electorate exercised their voting rights in the 2019 National Council elections. The average nationwide turnout was only 45 per cent. Switzerland will elect a new parliament in October, coinciding with the publication of this edition of "Swiss Review". Schaffhausen's voters will likely return to the ballot box in droves. Why is turnout in this northerly canton higher than anywhere else in Switzerland?

## "In our DNA"

Maybe Schaffhausen's picturesque old quarter can give us a clue. Christian Ritzmann, the deputy chancellor of the canton of Schaffhausen, works here in the government building. He is one of the people responsible for coordinating elections and popular votes in the canton. "Voting is deeply ingrained in Schaffhausen," he says. "It is in our DNA." But there is another factor at play. Voting has been mandatory in Schaffhausen for almost 150



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This edition:  
The keenest voters of them all.

years. It was also mandatory in other cantons after the creation of the modern federal Swiss state, but only in Schaffhausen does the obligation still apply.

If you miss any vote, you must pay a small fine of six Swiss francs to your municipality. That is unless you have a good excuse, e.g. holidays, professional commitments, illness. Or if you return your blank voting papers no later than three days after the relevant election or popular vote. Hence the obligation to vote is a lot less strict in practice, says Ritzmann. "It is a civic duty, but we are not coercing people."

## Schaffhausen, a small canton on the border

Mandatory voting – which does not apply to people aged 65 or over, nor to Schaffhausen natives living abroad – seems to enjoy wide acceptance among the local population. A popular initiative to abolish it was rejected at the ballot box 40 years ago. People view the obligation to vote as a Schaffhausen speciality, says Ritzmann. They are in favour of it, because politics is deeply rooted in Schaffhausen. The canton is relatively small, and there is a greater proximity and familiarity between policymakers and the public. "You can bump into our politicians in the pedestrian precinct, on the bus and in restaurants." Although the mone-

Schaffhausen is the epitome of a border canton. It shares 152 kilometres of its boundary with Germany and only 33 kilometres with its two neighbouring cantons Zurich and Thurgau.



tary penalty is more symbolic than anything else, it may also be playing a role to encourage people to vote, says Hannes Germann, long-time Schaffhausen SVP member of the Council of States. "Who wants to pay the state more than absolutely necessary?" But political awareness is another key factor, he adds, attributable among other things to Schaffhausen's location on the border with Germany. This led to tensions before and during the Second World War in particular. "Consequently, people felt compelled to talk about politics."

## Civic duty

"We have a lively political scene with many stakeholders both young and old," says Germann's election opponent Simon Stocker, who is standing as the local SP candidate for the Council of States. Stocker believes that mandatory voting has a positive influence. He says that people also regard their civic duty as a privilege, so they would probably still vote in high numbers even if they were not formally obliged to do so. Not that he would ever want to scrap obligatory voting, he hastens to add. Many others share his view. "Mandatory voting is unique and it belongs to Schaffhausen."

Schaffhausen's weekly market is just a short stroll from the cantonal government building. Among the market-goers are voices both for and against mandatory voting. "It should be optional," says a 42-year-old care provider who insists she would still vote regardless. Many only go to the ballot box to save money, not because they are genuinely interested. Others who wish to vote, like the mentally handicapped, are unable to do so. "Mandatory voting is no bad thing," counters an



84-year-old former railway worker. It means that no one can complain about the result.

#### Follow Schaffhausen's lead?

Do the many people who vote in Schaffhausen actually feel engaged or slightly pressured? It is a little bit of both, say the experts. Political scientists Eveline Schwegler and Thomas Milic have found that the proportion of blank ballots – without

a yes or a no – is higher in Schaffhausen than in other cantons, suggesting a certain degree of cynicism among voters. Some go to the polls to avoid the fine, and don't bother to read up on the respective proposals. However, Schwegler and Milic also say that voter turnout in Schaffhausen is still the highest even after you deduct the small percentage of these blank ballots.

In other cantons as well as at federal level, there have been various

National attraction and Schaffhausen's calling card – the magnificent, breathtaking Rhine Falls.  
Photo: Keystone

motions aimed at copying the Schaffhausen model, the ritual complaint being that not even half of the electorate in Switzerland bother to vote on average – quite a contrast from the halcyon days of the early 20th century, when the turnout in National Council elections was 80 per cent. One of the reasons for the decline in turnout is that people feel less attached to political parties than they used to be. Hence parties are less able to mobilise voters, says

Daniel Kübler, a political scientist at the Aarau Centre for Democracy Studies.

Low turnout can become a problem if the results are not respected, according to Kübler. "But people in Switzerland are good at accepting voting results, regardless of how close the outcome is or how low the turnout was." The way that the Swiss political system is structured means that election results, in particular, affect the composition of government less than they would in other countries. This also explains our relatively low election turnouts, says Kübler. If you don't vote in the election, you can still participate in direct democracy several times a year. And when a popular vote is regarded as important, participation can easily

skyrocket. The highest turnout in recent decades was when 79 per cent voted in 1992 on whether Switzerland should join the European Economic

**Voting has been mandatory in Schaffhausen for almost 150 years. It was also mandatory in other cantons after the creation of the modern federal Swiss state, but only in Schaffhausen does the obligation still apply.**

"Voting is deeply ingrained in Schaffhausen," says Christian Ritzmann, who is one of the people responsible for coordinating elections and popular votes in the canton.

Photo: SWE



SVP member of the Council of States, Hannes Germann, attributes Schaffhausen's political culture to the canton's location on the border with Germany – a source of tension during the Second World War. Photo: parlament.ch



For SP politician Simon Stocker, mandatory voting is a privilege. "It is unique and belongs to Schaffhausen."

Photo provided



The picturesque old quarter of Schaffhausen epitomises the diminutive canton, where policymakers and the public enjoy greater proximity. Politicians are often seen around the town. Photo: Keystone

Area. Essentially, it is desirable in any democracy for voter turnout to be as high as possible. Mandatory voting has had an impact in Schaffhausen, but it only goes so far, says Kübler. The level of interest in the issues at hand is, in his view, the main factor shown to affect turnout. Political education at school is, therefore, all the more important. "Switzerland does way too little in this regard compared to neighbouring democracies."

We gaze again at the foaming Rhine Falls as our train leaves Schaffhausen – a mass of water as refreshing as the canton's approach to voting.

Voter participation among the Swiss Abroad is quite a bit lower than in the canton of Schaffhausen. Visit page 22 for an analysis of voting behaviour in the "Fifth Switzerland".