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Home is far away – except online

More and more Swiss citizens are living abroad and they are playing an increasingly important role in foreign policy. Internet voting is the key to being heard by politicians in Switzerland and to ensuring that issues are represented successfully.

By Tim Guldemann

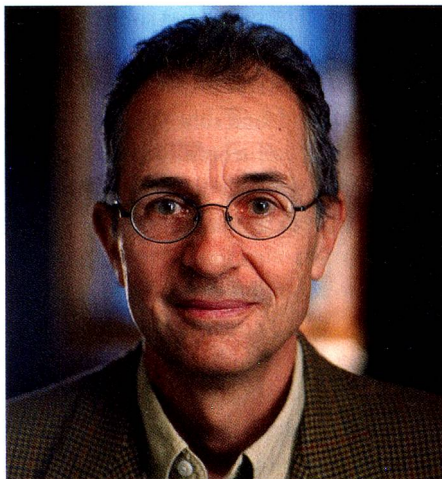
I have the impression that Switzerland treats the Swiss abroad like an aunt living overseas. She is seldom thought of, and the attitude towards her is even one of indifference. But as soon as she gets in touch or even imposes herself, people are eager to assure her of how fond they are of her. I have already outlined this view of mine once before, in the German regional section of last November's "Swiss Review".

Assurances only rarely lead to action in life. That is a well-known fact. And yet we are so proud of them, whether it is Chevrolet or Corbusier, Renée Zellweger or Bruno Ganz. More than one in ten Swiss men and one in ten Swiss women live abroad. They make a huge contribution to how our nation is perceived on the international stage and to its prosperity, but they have little influence over Swiss politics. This is also the result of a national incongruity – our economy operates globally, our culture is cosmopolitan and our elite are citizens of the world. By contrast, our politicians think locally or, at best, nationally.

Anyone who wants anything from this political system has to push hard for it. This applies to the Swiss abroad in particular. To raise the issues that concern them in Switzerland, they need to play a more active role, and the best way to do that is in elections and referenda. This is how they can get their voice heard.

Constant drips wear away the stone

The number of Swiss abroad entered on the electoral roll has doubled since the end of the 1990s. The figure today stands at 143,000 eligible voters, which is over a quarter of all adult Swiss abroad. This increase is encouraging. However, three out of four persons entitled to vote, and as many as five out of six in North and South America, are relinquishing their voting right. This means that those entitled to vote abroad only make up 2.5% of the electorate, which does not pose enough of a threat to local politicians. But if this proportion



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were to rise to almost 8% – as is currently the case in Geneva – the politicians would have to prick up their ears and the parties would have to take notice. This is where the potential lies.

Postal voting is not very appealing. The vote may arrive late or it may not even arrive at all. This acts as a deterrent. Switzerland seems far away. Internet voting is different – casting a vote at the click of a mouse is easy, attractive and effective.

The Internet is changing politics more rapidly and more profoundly than we ever anticipated. Firstly, a second public sphere is developing alongside conventional print and electronic media. Anyone can actively participate in it. This debate is increasingly influencing political life and attracting new players, like the Pirate Party in Germany. Secondly, the Internet is creating completely new opportunities for dialogue between citizens and the state. This is resulting in new prospects for citizen participation in decision-making. However, many parliamentary democracies are not yet ready to embrace this despite growing demands from citizen movements to have their say.

This is not the case in Switzerland. Owing to its direct democracy, our nation has a unique foundation in place to play a pioneering role in this field internationally.

Our e-government platform already facilitates cooperation with the authorities. E-voting, together with the new forms of political debate on electronic networks, will produce lasting changes to our political system. This will create great opportunities for the Swiss abroad to participate in domestic Swiss politics.

The mills are grinding slowly

Parliament has called upon the Federal Council gradually to introduce e-voting. Federal government and the cantons have developed a joint initiative to achieve this. The primary target group is the Swiss abroad. Thirteen cantons are working on electronic voting. This opportunity was already available in four cantons for the National Council elections last autumn. It was also available in 12 cantons for the referendum on 11 March. The response is encouraging, with half of those able to use the system taking advantage of it immediately. However, the mills are grinding slowly because the system sometimes requires major changes to the administration of the cantonal electoral roll. Some cantons, such as Vaud for example, have still not made much progress.

The Federal Chancellery has set itself the goal of enabling the majority of Swiss abroad who are eligible to vote to take part in parliamentary elections electronically in 2015. The more the Swiss abroad actively support this project, the faster it will be achieved and the greater the chances will be that they can influence the result of the 2015 elections in their favour.

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA)



has launched a petition calling on the Federal Council to introduce e-voting as quickly and as broadly as possible.

You can also sign this petition!

www.petiton.aso.ch