

2011 - a year of elections for Swiss New Zealanders

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Craig Press surveyed voting rights for citizens of 16 other European countries to see how the voting rights of the Swiss abroad compared. Here is the summary of what he found; his full article, with very informative tables, can be found on: <http://www.swiss.org.nz/page.php?ID=759>

Voting rights for citizens living overseas

Most countries, like Switzerland, allow their citizens living overseas to vote in national elections. The three countries in the sample that don't are Denmark, Eire and Norway.

Most European Union member states also have a permissive approach for elections to the European Parliament. Only three of the member states in the sample, Belgium, Denmark and Eire, do not allow their overseas citizens to vote in European elections.

Elections to regional assemblies and parliaments, including state parliaments such as Swiss cantonal parliaments, show a more mixed pattern. Less than a third of the countries allow their citizens living overseas to participate in elections to this level of government. Even in Switzerland, the right to participate in cantonal elections differs between cantons and is not guaranteed to all Swiss abroad.

The right for citizens living overseas to participate in local or municipal elections is more limited. Most countries tie the local government franchise to a requirement to live in the relevant community. Only three countries allow overseas citizens to vote in local elections including France which only permits proxy voting.

Despite these differences, the general trend is for countries to extend the voting rights of their citizens living abroad. This is in response to the increasing mobility of populations, governments' wish to boost participation rates and to reinforce their overseas citizens' sense of connection to their home country.

In Germany's case, the right to vote in elections to the Bundestag used to be limited to a maximum of 25 years while living abroad. In 2009 this restriction was lifted and every German citizen living abroad can now vote for the German Bundestag no matter how long they have been abroad.

Similarly, in 1997 Portuguese citizens living abroad became eligible to vote in presidential elections, national referendums and elections to the national parliament.

In a few cases the size and cultural importance of a diaspora has led to formal representation for overseas citizens. In 2000 Italy citizens living abroad gained represented with 12 seats in the House of Representatives and six seats in the Senate.

In France, citizens living abroad have been provided with representation in the Senate since 1948.

Since 1983 twelve senators have been selected in this way. The selection is made by a 150 member electoral college of the High Council of the French Citizens Abroad. The 150 members are directly elected by voters abroad.

Portuguese citizens living abroad are grouped into two electoral districts, each electing two members of parliament. One electoral district covers all European countries and the other district covers the rest of the world.

The role of citizens living overseas can also be especially crucial in countries where the head of state is directly elected. This has been the case in presidential elections in Poland and the Baltic states where the votes of citizens living overseas have been important to the outcome of some elections in recent years.

Parliamentary representation for the Swiss abroad

There is an ongoing debate about representation in parliament for the Swiss abroad. While several of the major parties' lists include candidates who live abroad, there is no formal representation for Swiss citizens living abroad in either the Nationalrat or Ständerat.

Discussion about guaranteeing parliamentary representation for the Swiss abroad is available from the following page:

http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Interactive/swissabroad_forum/should_swiss_abroad

The text of an interview with the Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad about ways of extending participation by the Swiss abroad is available from the following Swissinfo page:

http://www.swissinfo.ch/Swiss Expatriates_feel_sidelined

Direct democracy

Switzerland is the only country that makes frequent use of direct democracy among the sample countries. Swiss citizens who live abroad retain full rights to participate in the frequent initiatives and referenda at the federal level that are at the core of the Swiss system of government. This aspect of their voting rights differentiates them from all other overseas populations.

Let's vote!

Happy voting and remember that several cantons are monitoring the level of participation by the Swiss abroad. The more members of the Fifth Switzerland that vote, the greater the likelihood that there will be further enhancements to online voting. It will also help ensure that needs of the Fifth Switzerland, are more likely to be considered as part of government decision-making.