

Swiss Voter Turnout Patterns and Public Attitudes Toward Digital Voting Infrastructure

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Since its independence, Switzerland has existed as a model for direct democracy. Each year, Swiss voters attend the polls several times to cast ballots on issues at the municipal, Cantonal, and federal level. Frequent elections, coupled with freedom of the press and low levels of corruption, appear to make Switzerland an example for a free and functioning democracy. However, data procured from the Swiss Federal Statistics Office reveals that Switzerland suffers from a serious problem: voter turnout. Analysis of data sets from the FSO shows that in the last federal election of October 2023, only 47 of eligible voters participated. Historically, Switzerland did not experience such low levels of voter participation. In 1933, voter turnout reached a peak of 81%, but since then, it has decreased by over 30 percentage points. The first part of this investigation seeks to identify potential causes of this decline, particularly focusing on the relationship between the frequency of federal votes and voter turnout. A Pearson Correlation Coefficient (PCC) analysis reveals a negative correlation between the number of federal votes held and voter turnout, suggesting that the high frequency of voting may lead to voter fatigue, wherein citizens become disengaged due to the constant demands of participation (see figure 1). A potential solution to this issue encourages Swiss voters to vote digitally, a recent trend proven effective in other European Free Trade Association countries like Estonia. Since implementing “E-Democracy”, the Estonian government

has seen over half of its eligible voters opt into voting over the internet, as well as change in voter turnout (Jourdain, 2023).

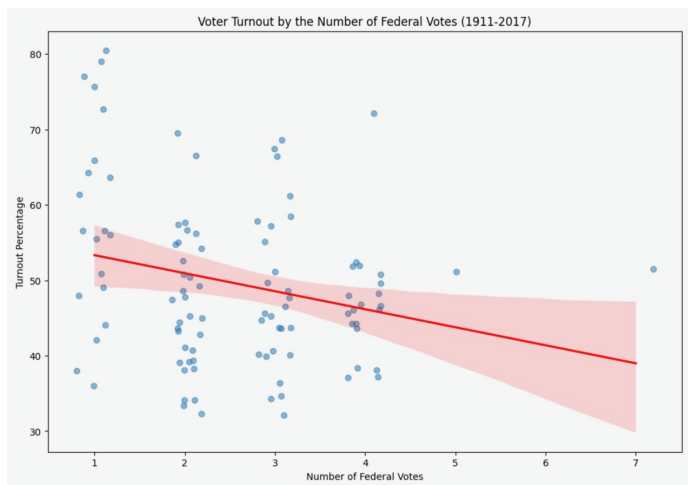


Figure 1 - Voter Turnout and Number of Votes Called



Figure 2 - Basel SBB Train Station

This second part of this study examines regional variations in voter turnout across Swiss cantons, with qualitative data collection to gauge interest in digital voting. In the most recent federal election, voter turnout was highest in the canton of Schaffhausen at over 60%, and lowest in Appenzell Innerrhoden at just under 25%. This pattern was not consistent in previous electoral cycles, indicating the variability of voter behaviour. The high voter turnout in Schaffhausen can be attributed to its compulsory voting laws, which impose financial penalties for non-participation. Conversely, the low turnout in Appenzell Innerrhoden may be influenced by the canton's traditional voting practices, where ballots are cast publicly, potentially deterring participation due to concerns about social pressure and lack of voting anonymity. The canton of Geneva, despite being one of the largest in Switzerland, also exhibited low voter turnout. This

could be due to the high proportion of foreign residents, who, despite having the legal right to vote, feel disconnected from the local community and thus less inclined to participate in the electoral process. Since 2008, Switzerland has tested numerous pilot programs for digital voting in Vaud, Geneva, and Grison but with limited efficacy and participation. The qualitative data present in this study included 98 interviews conducted in all 26 Swiss Cantons. For those who completed a full interview, respondents were asked 14 questions about their experience voting in Swiss elections, as well as their thoughts on voting over the internet. When asked about their level of trust in digital voting, 100% of those surveyed cited security as a concern, a sentiment not present when voting by mail. When asked what kind of security issues they had over the use of digital voting, “hacking” and “privacy” were the most common. Many of those surveyed added that they did not feel that the Swiss voting system, currently operated through by post, required any change. Overall, the public is sceptical that transitioning to a totally digital democracy will accomplish general voting tasks, let alone act as a solution to the issues present in Swiss democracy.

Citations

Jourdain, M. J. (2023, March 7). *Five takeaways from the Estonian elections, where security trumped inflation by a landslide*. Atlantic Council.

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