

Switzerland

# E-voting – a threat to democracy

## Software glitch in the counting of votes in the National Council elections

by Marita Brune



Marita Brune.  
(Picture ma)

On 22 October 2023, the Swiss Federal Statistical Office made a grave error that had serious consequences not so much for the results of the Swiss National Council elections but rather for citizens' trust in democracy. This once again raises the fundamental question of the risks of e-voting. The incor-

rect result was caused by a software problem: three cantons were working with an older version and the error occurred when the results were transmitted to the federal government.

Marcel Joppa spoke about this on "Radio Kontrafunk" with Claudio Zanetti,<sup>1</sup> former National Councillor and Swiss PR entrepreneur.

For Claudio Zanetti, this glitch highlights a fundamental problem with e-voting. Citizens must be able to rely on the figures. "Merkel once said years ago that democracy is a form of government based on trust. And of course, she thought that people had to trust her. I think that's nonsense. Democracy is a form of government based on mistrust, organised mistrust."

He is addressing one of the basic principles of democracy here: The king or regent should be trusted by the subjects; he had been given his power by God. But the subjects realised that you can never trust the powerful because they abuse their power all too easily. So over time, a form of government was developed to control the rulers and limit their power: Democracy.

Zanetti continues: "That's why we have elections, that's why we have checks and balances, that's why we have separation of powers, terms of office and so on. But where the citizen must be able to trust is in the procedure. That is a constitutional requirement in every democracy, even in Germany. The result obtained must be correct and I don't have to expect any surprises."



Printed voting papers can be recounted – basically by anyone. (Picture ma)

### "E-voting should not be used at all"

For Zanetti, the conclusion is clear: "E-voting should not be used at all." The administration absolutely wants this, he says, as it is their pet project. They would argue that this is the only way that many Swiss living abroad could participate in elections and votes. Zanetti: "But I am not prepared to accept this risk, because the dangers are simply too great." On election night, citizens must be able to trust "that there hasn't been a computer glitch. Or even if they say, yes, there was something, but we've fixed it – it shouldn't be the case that citizens have to trust in that. If I fill in a normal ballot paper, drop it in the ballot box or send it in by post, I could recount them, if necessary, they are physically at hand. But if it's done electronically, then I've given all my power to the administration, and I think that's highly problematic."

Regarding the administration's argument, he says: "Let's take the Swiss abroad. We have Swiss people in Africa and South America, and we get some data sent to us from there and then we must believe that it's all true. Then we would make our democracy vulnerable in an area where it is not actually vulnerable. I'm sorry for the people who live so far away that they sometimes receive their mail too late, but that really can't be the problem for the whole of Switzerland."

### **Verifiability without special prior knowledge**

*Marcel Joppa* opposes his arguments with the fact that the supporters wanted to make e-voting more secure with more staff and more checks. Zanetti counters this by saying that this is typical. They are asking for more staff, and everything would become more expensive. Instead, he demands: "It must be simpler, and the processes must be transparent so that it can also be checked by a citizen without any special prior knowledge. Incidentally, the German Constitutional Court once ruled on this in a similar case, saying that no, this electronic stuff is not needed,

because the sovereign must be able to understand what is happening, even without special skills. And that just seems to me to be an incredibly important prerequisite for a democracy to function, because otherwise we are simply dependent on them not lying to us, and we know how much politicians like to lie."

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Joppa interviewing Claudio Zanetti, *Kontrafunk aktuell*, 31 October 2023  
<https://kontrafunk.radio/de/sendung-nachhoeren/politik-und-zeitgeschehen/kontrafunk-aktuell/kontrafunk-aktuell-vom-31-oktober-2023>

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