

E-voting: what does it mean here – and what does it mean elsewhere?

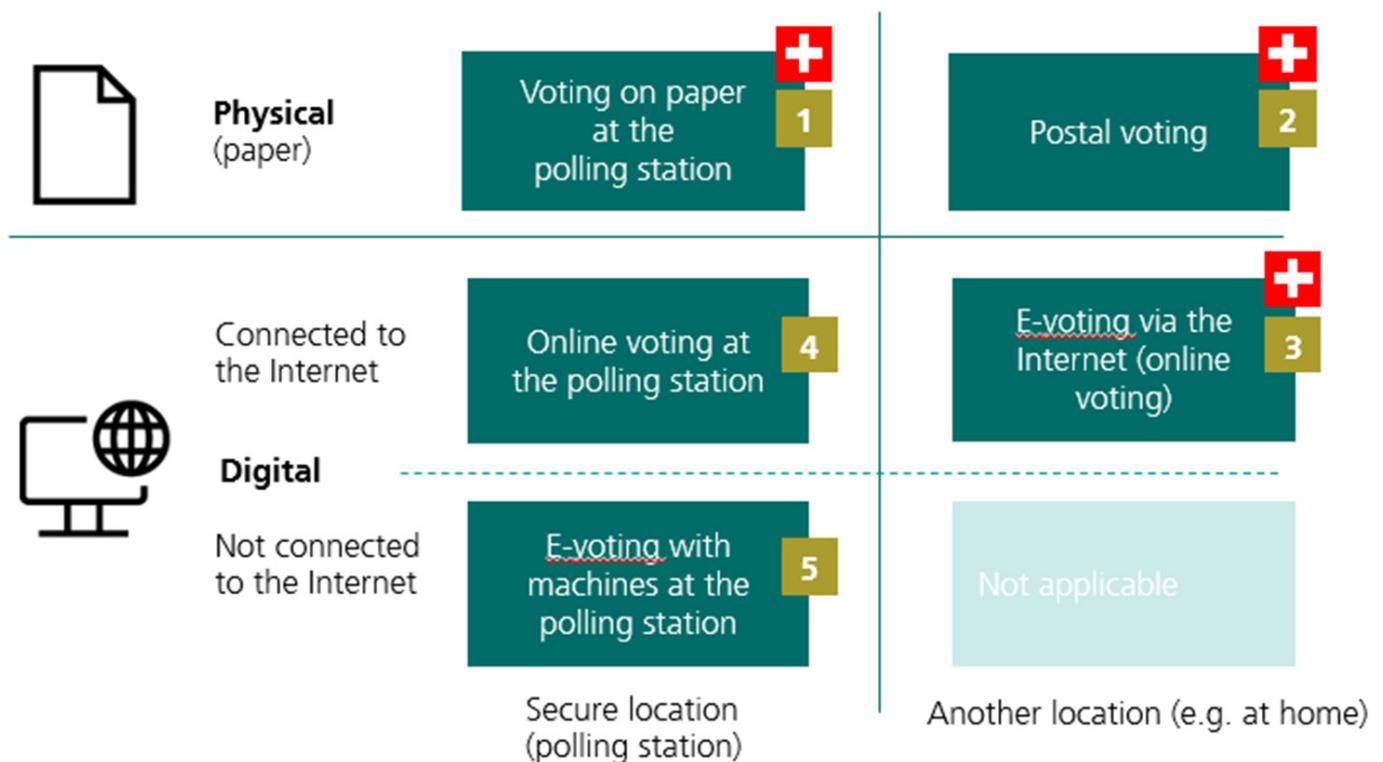
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Confederation

Since 2004, Switzerland has been building on its experience with e-voting – the option of voting online in an election or referendum, regardless of location. What forms of electronic voting are used around the world? A brief overview.

E-voting does not mean the same thing everywhere in the world. In Switzerland, it refers to the option of casting a vote in political elections and referendums online, away from a polling station. The term “electronic voting channel” is also commonly used. In other countries, meanwhile, e-voting can mean casting a ballot using a voting machine at the polling station itself – with the machine not necessarily connected to the Internet. In contrast to other countries, the introduction of e-voting in Switzerland is a technical expansion of postal voting and does not involve any fundamental changes to voting practices.

The three voting channels in Switzerland



In Switzerland, there are three voting channels:

- Ballot box (physical (on paper) / at a secure location)
Voting documents are completed and placed into a ballot box at a polling station.
- Postal voting (physical (on paper) / at any location chosen by the voter, e.g. at home)
The completed voting documents are sent to the municipality by post before the voting Sunday, or are delivered by hand to the municipality's letter box.
- Online (digital / at any location chosen by the voter, e.g. at home)
Those eligible to vote in an election or referendum can cast their ballot away from a polling station on a PC, tablet or smartphone.

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In many other countries, e-voting means casting a ballot using equipment in the polling station itself, monitored by representatives of state or independent voting authorities. Voters cast their ballots using voting machines. This hardware is either connected to the Internet (see section 4 of the graphic) or not (see section 5 of the graphic). Various types of equipment are available, from simple machines with physical buttons to touchscreen options.

An example of this is Brazil, where the election system is very complex. On-site electronic voting was introduced there in the mid-1990s. The aim was to prevent voting fraud, to record results more quickly and accurately and to improve accessibility for voters. In the United States, too, ballots are often cast using voting computers – usually successfully.

Voting machines: high maintenance and not uncontroversial

The problem with using these machines is that they require a high degree of maintenance and their technology quickly becomes outdated. Once they need to be replaced at their end of life, large-scale investment is also required. In addition, there still seems to be no guarantee that voting machines are consistently isolated and protected from attacks. For example, Russia is suspected to have infiltrated voting machines in some US states. In Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court banned the use of voting machines in 2009; they have also been removed from use in Ireland and the Netherlands.

From the polling station to online voting: critical voices

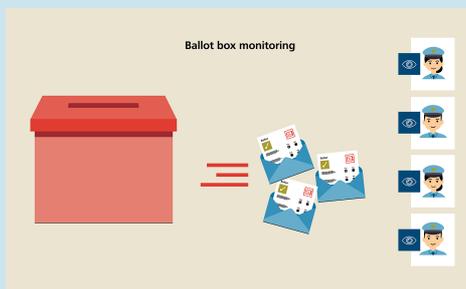
E-voting via the Internet away from a polling station is also controversial. Along with Switzerland, countries offering this type of electronic voting include Estonia and Australia. Finland, meanwhile, decided against introducing it in 2017. One justification for the decision was a fear that voting could be subject to compulsion or votes could be bought outside the controlled environment of the polling station. The secrecy of the ballot could also be jeopardized if, for example, individuals within a family were in a position to exert coercion or control. The same arguments could be made against postal voting.

E-voting as a digital alternative to postal voting

In contrast to e-voting, postal voting is well established in Switzerland after more than 30 years of positive experiences, and it enjoys a high level of trust. In this country, it has been politically acceptable for decades to allow the casting of ballots in private, in an environment which is not subject to official control – and for Swiss Post to handle the transport of ballots. This is why the Swiss Confederation and cantons support e-voting as a method that continues to uphold the culture and tradition of political rights in Switzerland while ensuring that these rights keep pace with 21st century technology.

This distinguishes Switzerland from states in which postal voting is unusual or is intended only for particular groups of individuals, e.g. people with a disability, military personnel serving abroad or those living in remote areas. In these countries, e-voting online from home represents a genuine paradigm shift. However, this is not the case in Switzerland, where e-voting does not involve any changes to the voting culture and where this cultural shift has already occurred due to postal voting.

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Thanks to universal verifiability, voters and



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**HOW CITIZENS CAN VERIFY TH
THEIR VOTES HAVE BEEN CAST
DURING E-VOTING WITHOUT
HAVING BEEN ALTERED**

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