

baloti.ch - a multi-lingual e-Participation Platform for Swiss Migrants

Abstract: baloti.ch was an attempt to give migrants in Switzerland the opportunity to become familiar with the Swiss political system in a practical way. During a two-year pilot phase, direct democracy could be exercised in multiple languages on the platform parallel to the actual national referendums. In this way, the platform enabled access and participation to one of the essential elements of the Swiss political system - direct democracy. The online platform was open to all and could also be used by Swiss citizens or for educational purposes.

Keywords: (maximum 5 words) e-participation, internet voting, voting process, migrants, Switzerland,

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1. The e-participation and i-voting platform baloti.ch

Caused by the rather restrictive naturalisation laws in several European countries a relatively large part of the adult population in Switzerland is not part of the electorate (Caramani/Strijbis 2013: 399). Historically, the share of the electorate relative to the overall population was however steadily growing. Sequentially, in Switzerland suffrage became independent of wealth, religion, gender and age to a certain degree. In the French speaking part of Switzerland and partly but to a lesser extent also in the German-speaking part the Swiss migrants are allowed to vote on local, partly even cantonal matters. Recent attempts in order to introduce further voting rights for migrants on the local level have failed: Basel-Stadt (2010: 81% No), Bern (2010: 72% No), Luzern (2011: 84% No) and Zürich (2013: 75% No) all rejected respective citizen's initiatives. Political debates on the topic are usually very controversial.

The website baloti.ch¹ was therefore created as an e-participation project to give the under- or unrepresented part of the Swiss population the opportunity to have a say in politics. Currently, a bit less than a quarter of the population living in Switzerland does not have citizenship and therefore no political rights on the national level (Fibbi 2012; Caroni 2013).

Besides its practical aspect the project was trying to give answers to the following broader questions:

1) Is it possible to create an interest in one of the main traits of the Swiss political system – the national referendums votes taking place three to four times a year – with

1 In Esperanto the word *baloti* means to vote, to elect.

the help of an online platform, and to sustain that interest in the long run? Can the platform *baloti.ch* be propagated in all regions and language groups of Switzerland, among all age groups, among the well and less well educated migrants? How can such a website be managed and advertised? Which advertising and diffusion measures will prove to be the most effective and efficient ones?

2) Can we generate – in parallel to real world referendums votes – internet voting data on *baloti.ch* giving us hints on the political behavior of migrants living in Switzerland? Does voting behavior by migrants on *baloti.ch* differ from the one of Swiss residents?

Looking at the landscape of institutionalised Swiss e-participation and online politics, we can say that there are only very few sustainable portals in operation. During pre-election times there is essentially the voting advice application *smartvote.ch*, providing some hints and assistance to the undecided or curious voters. There is also the political discussion platform *politnetz.ch*, slowly developing into the main political discussion forum, particularly in the German-speaking part of the country. And there is *vimentis.ch* which carries out a successful yearly online survey and whose members are also active offline providing civic education to young Swiss citizens on the local level. It has been critically observed that the 'wear' on e-participation projects is very high. Many projects do not get beyond the pilot phase, even where the funds invested are considerable.

The online platform *baloti.ch* was an attempt to give migrants in Switzerland the opportunity to become familiar with the Swiss political system in a practical way. During a two-year pilot phase, direct democracy could be exercised in multiple languages on the platform parallel to the actual national referendums. In this way, it enabled access and participation to one of the essential elements of the Swiss political system, namely direct democracy. The online platform was open to all and could also be used by Swiss citizens or for educational purposes in schools.

Baloti.ch therefore targeted several groups of users:

- Migrants living in Switzerland independent of their residence status;
- Young Swiss citizens below 18 years;
- Students from all over Switzerland, irrespective of their nationality.

The information provided on each referendum on *baloti.ch* was translated by a team of translators into the eleven languages most spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Albanian, Serbian, Croatian and Tamil. To ensure a high quality we utilised the cross-check principle. Every translated text was checked by another native speaker of that language, which at times resulted in repetitions or even differences. To keep efforts within reasonable limits the text was kept concise. The vocabulary used corresponded approximately to a lower secondary school level.

- The content of the information per referendum on the platform was as follows:
- Name of the referendum and brief information (what is it about?)
- Initiators and voting recommendations (who is behind it?)
- Arguments for and against (why?)

- Information about direct democracy in general (how does it work in Switzerland?)
- Section for voting with a key for encryption

The data collection and analysis were anonymous. Personal data was not saved long-term or used for any reason other than the analysis. Participants were informed of this in a disclaimer on the website and also during the voting process. To keep the obstacles to participation as low as possible users were not required to register to vote but rather only needed a valid email address in order to receive the encryption key.

What was innovative about this project was that the online voting took place parallel to the actual Swiss national referendums. The platform was designed to be as user-friendly as possible, however, as in real referendums, there were certain formal requirements. The only part of the platform not directly linked to the voting procedure was a visual encyclopaedia on the topic 'direct democracy in Switzerland' that was created with the help of two graphic design studios. The inclusion of discussion forums, cross references to media content on the referendum topics and video clips would have been conceivable for a fully developed platform but due to the effort required was not realistic in the pilot phase.

1.1 The Voting Process

The actual voting process was copied as simply but as realistically as possible in analogy to a paper vote. In the first design of the website, users were led through the voting process by way of a 'traffic light' system that progressed from red to yellow to green. Presumably 'simple' graphics led users through the voting process. During the first referendum, in which only *one* initiative was voted on, we did not identify the shortcomings of this design. However, the second referendum, comprising of three initiatives and a key question (see letter a in Fig. 1), was far more complex. Feedback from users and our own evaluation of this second referendum hinted at difficulties with the voting process. A relatively large proportion of potential voters got lost in the process. Various modifications were then made to the design and processes in order to correct these problems.

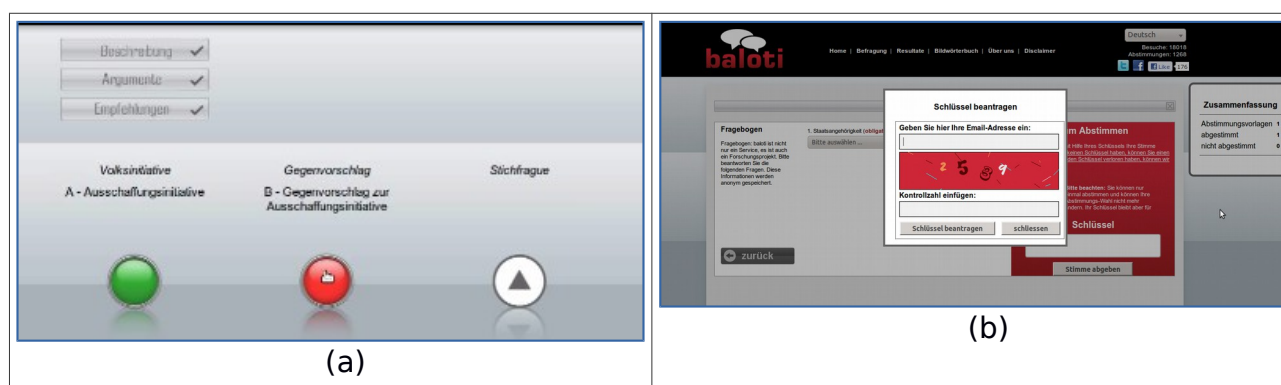


Figure 1: Some graphical design elements of baloti.ch such as the original traffic light system (a), and the request for a voting code (b).

The most important changes made to the baloti website were as follows:

- In the initial design, it was compulsory to read the chapters on 'description', 'arguments' and 'recommendations' to be able to access the actual voting form in a sequence. This requirement unnecessarily complicated navigation of the website. The use of 'traffic lights' to signal the current stage of the voting process led to confusion among users. We modified the process so that it became possible to vote even without having read all of the material.
- To vote, users had to request a personal code used for encryption. Those who began the voting process without a voting code were guided back to the start page to request the required code when they attempted to submit their vote. This way of navigation confused users. An additional pop-up window (see letter b in Fig. 1) was therefore added which enabled users to request a voting code at any stage of the voting process without having to switch to another page. From a user-friendliness point of view, requiring a voting code (which was emailed to users) could be seen as an unnecessary complication. However, we regarded this step as equivalent to the formal rules that must be observed when voting in person or by post, such as that the voting paper must be personally signed for it to be valid. We consciously wanted to avoid voting being a matter of clicking once on a 'yes' or 'no' button, analogous to a 'like' on Facebook, to stress that the decision to vote is a serious and deliberate one.
- In the initial version the 'vote now' button created further confusion. It was supposed to signal that the user had read through all the items in the traffic light system and could now vote. However, the button led users to believe that by clicking on it the voting process was completed even though this was not the case and the insertion of the required encryption code had not yet taken place. Because of this we conceivably lost a considerable number of votes in the first referendum in September 2010. We resolved the problem by changing the button text (to 'cast your vote') and inserting an additional overview box where users could see how many proposals were part of the referendum and how much of the process they had already correctly completed.
- At the end of the voting process a new window was inserted which presented a summary of the proposals voted on. The purpose of this window was to show users what stage their 'voting ballot' was at and what steps still had to be completed.

The analysis of user data indicated that the modifications made an improvement. Compared to the first referendum fewer clicks were required for a validly cast vote.

1.2 Project Management and Diffusion Campaign

For the design of baloti.ch we cooperated with specialists from the Fachhochschule Bern to cover the technical side of internet voting (Dubuis et al. 2011). The project was interdisciplinary and comprised of IT personnel as well as staff with language and social science expertise. Three interns from the MAPS programme of the University of the Neuchâtel carried out valuable work for the project and were able to collect credits towards their Master's degree. The IT for the project took up, at least at the beginning, a disproportionate share of the work, but it was important as it formed the necessary

foundation for the operative part. The effort required for the technical part was definitely underestimated.

Once the technical side of the voting system could be considered secure, the primary goal was then to advertise the platform and introduce the pilot project to the target groups. We made great efforts to do this, however we also realised that 'continual advertising' would require too much work and, in any event, would not automatically result in more visitors to the website. The respective advertising campaigns are briefly described below.

1.2.1 Television and Radio

At the beginning of the project there was a national television broadcast about baloti.ch. In the further course of the project we used non-commercial local radio stations with multiple and foreign language broadcasting formats as diffusion partners (Weyand 2008; Vasella/Weyand 2009). For example, on 13 November 2010 in Aarau, a street campaign organised by Radio K used flyers to advertise baloti.ch.

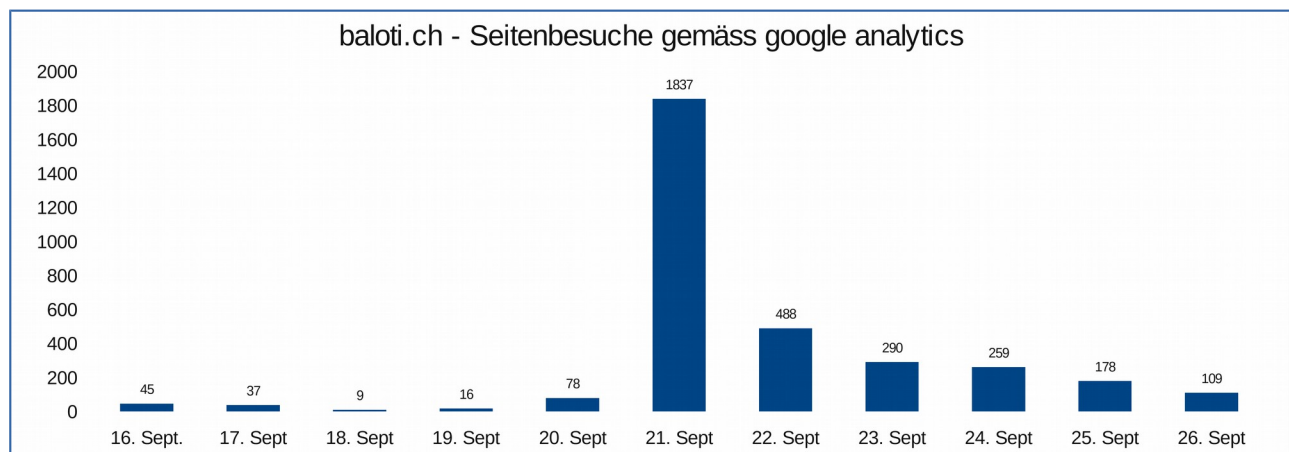


Figure 2: Visitor statistics for baloti.ch from 16-26 September 2010

The impact of coverage in the Swiss national television evening news bulletin on 21 September 2010 was clearly evident in the visitor statistics obtained from Google Analytics (see Figure 2). The number of visitors to baloti.ch sharply increased on this date and then levelled out again. Of the total 3,300 visitors to the website during the time the electronic ballot boxes were open (16-26 September 2010), more than half visited the site on that particular day.

1.2.2 Printed and Online Press

To keep the path to the website as short as possible, some large media companies offered their online portals as advertising and diffusion channels. For the purpose of reporting on voting results on baloti.ch, we cooperated with the daily newspaper 20 minutes (in print and online as well as in French and German). Understandably, the online reporting on 20min proved far superior to print coverage. Visitor numbers on 20min Online are high and the path to another website due to an interest in its content is only one mouse click away.

Baloti.ch registered close to 4,300 visitors between 8 and 28 November 2010. Again, visitor numbers increased suddenly on 16 November 2010 when 20min online reported on the project (see Figure 3).

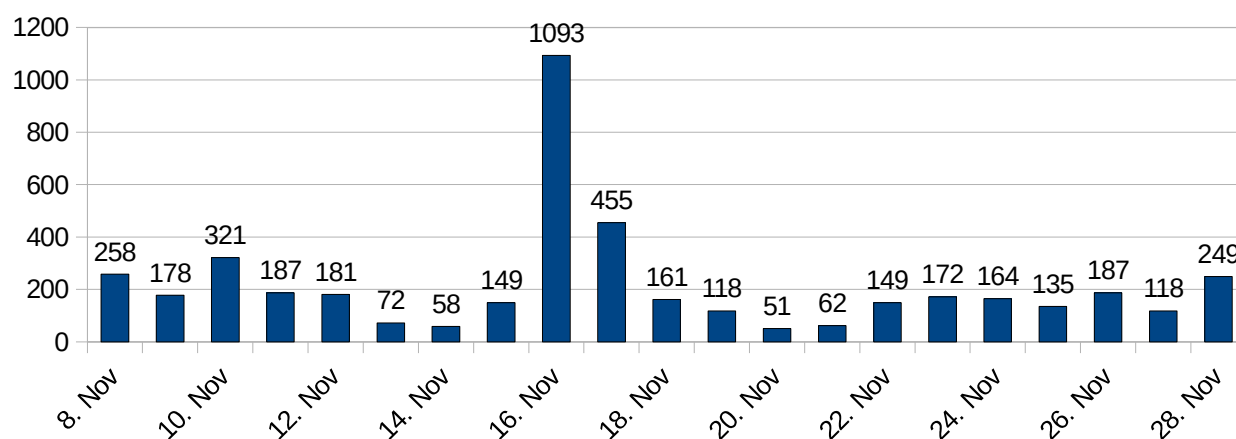


Figure 3: Visitor statistics for baloti.ch from 16-26 September 2010

1.2.3 Direct Emails

In November 2010, those who had voted in September 2010 on baloti.ch were invited directly via email to participate again. Though this action was repeated before every voting date its success was modest. Relatively few users voted repeatedly (see Tab. 4).

1.2.4 Multiplier Organisations, Distribution of Flyers

Migrant organisations (Matthey/Steiner 2009) as well as cantonal and city contact points were assessed as being valuable players for further diffusion and were continuously provided with flyers and other informative material. Migrant associations were contacted by post and email but were also personally visited. Even language schools with courses for migrants as well as cantonal and city migrant organisations were successively identified and asked to further promote the website.

1.2.5 Facebook Campaign

In order to reach more people, especially a younger audience, and to introduce *baloti.ch* to a wider potential orbit, we started a Facebook page during the end phase of the project (from the start of October 2011). A *baloti* fan page already existed on Facebook but it was looked after only sporadically. A Twitter account also existed, however the possibilities of achieving something in a short period of time were considerably greater on Facebook, which is why we decided to use this medium. Our goal was to reach a new target audience through the intensive and active administration of the fan page to publicise *baloti.ch* and in this way make people vote. The scope for a Facebook campaign was limited given the short amount of time remaining and the very limited budget. The campaign ran from 6-23 October 2011.

From 6 October 2011 we boosted the *baloti* Facebook page with additional information, published regular wall posts, shared links and posed questions to build up communication with existing 'fans' of the page. To direct the attention of other Facebook users to the *baloti* page we needed existing 'fans' to engage in the dialogue because it is only through a page's 'fans' and 'friends' that the page can be circulated and in this way reach further potential 'fans'. To increase the number of 'likes' ('fans') we created a 'welcome tab' where new visitors were requested to 'like' the fan page. In the final days before the referendum we posted a request to vote on *baloti.ch* together with the link to the website directly on the Facebook fan pages of corresponding organisations (for example, Second@s Plus, Grüne Schweiz, Smartvote, Politnetz.ch, Sosf, etc.). In addition, we took out an advertisement on Facebook from 21-23 October.

From 1 October to the referendum on 23 October we succeeded, through the above-mentioned activities, in increasing the monthly active users of the Facebook page from 53 to 420. Monthly active users included those people who interacted at least once with either the Facebook profile directly or through posts. This means that the more actively the page is administered and contributions or comments shared, the more active users can be won. This was clearly evident from the statistics. On those days where something was shared or published the hits increased substantially. With a total of 24 new 'likes' we had 128 'fans' by 23 October. On the whole, the impact was still modest given the actual effort.

The advertisement taken out from 21-23 October was shown to 10,971 Facebook users. Only 50 of those actually clicked on the advertisement and in doing so ended up at the *baloti* fan page. Of those 50 people only 12 connections (*baloti* Facebook fans) were formed. Statistics showed that the *baloti* Facebook page's audience was 43% female and 53% male and the primarily reached age category was the 25 to 44 years group (62% of users).

Our experience shows that even with a small amount of effort a certain level of activity can be obtained on a Facebook page. Clearly the number of new users was far too small that we can speak of a successful mobilisation. Furthermore, the increased activity on the Facebook page says nothing about the user's actual switch to the *baloti* website. That was of course the goal: using Facebook to mobilise people to vote on *baloti.ch*.

In principle, we can identify three problem areas. Due to a lack of time and staff resources it was impossible to build up any enduring interaction with users, something that is essential for online social networking. On the one hand this requires more time than just three weeks, while on the other hand it necessitates being online practically every day to communicate and interact. To increase the profile of an online site, offline actions are also essential. A further problem that we found in the administration of the Facebook page was the requirement on *baloti.ch* for multilingualism. To properly reach all potential *baloti* users, communication was not only in the four national languages but rather in a total of eleven languages. This would have been difficult to realise on the Facebook page and must be further thought out.

In conclusion, one can say that Facebook holds a certain mobilisation potential. However, the above mentioned weaknesses need to be avoided next time. In our view it is most important to establish a more active offline presence in order to succeed in increasing online use.

3. Results and Evaluation

The following section presents the data collected between the launch of *baloti.ch* until the end of the last vote in October 2011 (see Figure 4). During this time *baloti.ch* registered 17,513 visitors with an average of 43 visits per day, 12,546 of which can be attributed to individual visitors. 69.1% of visits are concentrated within the voting periods, during which time the daily average increased to 142. The busiest day registered 1,837 visits, due to the previously mentioned television broadcast.

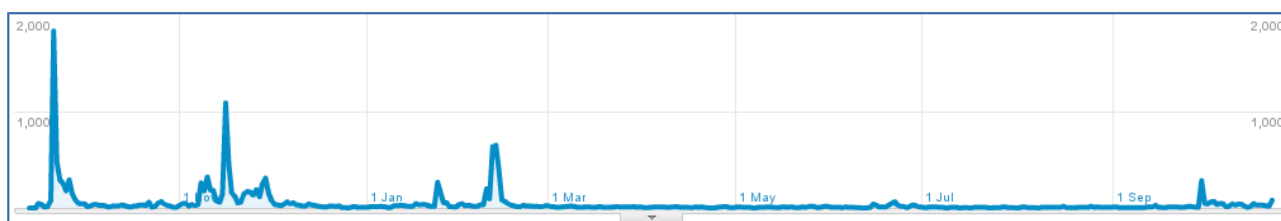


Figure 4: Number of visitors to *baloti.ch* according to Google Analytics

From the statistics it is clear that, despite increased marketing efforts including Facebook campaigns at the end of the pilot phase, the interest in *baloti.ch* decreased steadily over time.

86% of the visits came from Switzerland, with the second largest number coming from Germany. Table 1 illustrates the geographical distribution within Switzerland. The number of visitors from a geographical region has also been compared with the respective population of that region and then ranked accordingly.

Table 1: Geographical distribution per major cities according to Google Analytics

City	Visits %	Rank	Population 2009	No visits	% visits / population	Rank
Aarau	6.4	2	19'289	1'118	5.80	1
Zurich	35.9	1	368'677	6'292	1.71	2
Bern	6	3	123'466	1'048	0.85	3
Biel/Bienne	1	10	50'455	257	0.51	4
St. Gallen	2	7	72'642	344	0.47	5
Basel	3.6	4	166'173	628	0.38	6
Luzern	1.6	8	76'733	272	0.35	7
Lausanne	2.5	6	125'855	430	0.34	8
Genf	2.9	5	185'958	504	0.27	9
Winterthur	1.5	9	99'377	260	0.26	10

Table 2: Origins of visits according to Google Analytics (> 1% only)

Source	% visitors
direct	51.7
20min.ch	17.8
Google	10.4
Facebook	3.1
Tagesanzeiger	2.4
albinfo.ch	1.0

The origin of the visits was collated from among the sources. Direct access over the *baloti* website was the most used means of access, followed by the larger newspaper portals and migrant group platforms such as albinfo.ch (see Table 2).

3.1 Monitoring the voting process

The main goal of baloti.ch was to have those people who visited the website subsequently also to vote. We therefore selected various indicators to allow us to understand user behaviour and to evaluate to what extent we achieved our goals.

Table 3: Technical indicators for the voting process

Vote	Type and #	# Visits	Visits per day	# Visitors	Start	End	% Start	% End
Sept 2010	1 vote	3'531	252	3'025	2'640	359	74.8	10.2
Nov 2010	3 votes	4'555	215	3'505	2'617	327	57.5	7.2
Feb 2011	1 vote	2'849	129	2'372	1'136	360	39.9	12.6
Oct 2011	1 election	1'168	42	1'006	544	154	46.6	13.2

1,312 people requested a voting code, being 13.2% of all visitors. Of those people that requested a voting code, 69.3% actually voted. The request for a voting code is thus a good indicator for the voting intention of the visitor. Also clearly apparent in Table 3 are the problems that arose during the voting process on the second referendum that had three proposals. Only 7.2% of visitors actually voted.

Table 4: Percent of repeated voting on *baloti.ch* across the four votes

Participating	No Voters	% Voters
once	663	72.9
twice	170	18.7
three times	58	6.4
four times	19	2.1

A second indicator is the number of people who voted on *baloti.ch* repeatedly. 910 people voted at least once; 27.2% of those voted twice or more. If we assign a voting index between 1 and 4 with which to determine the average number of votes per person, the index for *baloti* is 1.4. This low value makes an analysis of the reasons for the weak commitment of visitors to the Baloti website necessary. Particularly, what needs to be studied is to what extent the weak commitment was caused by technical questions (user ignorance or difficulties with the application of the website) or due to other reasons (diffusion, interest, anxiety, etc.). This research was not able to be carried out within the pilot study. We surmise however, that the weak commitment relates to the short-lived novelty effect. That would be an argument in favour of not, in the first instance, installing the platform nationwide and long-term, but rather locally and linked to concrete events.

4. Internet Voting on baloti.ch

In the pilot it was possible to vote on five proposals on three referendum dates on baloti.ch. As part of the voting process we collected some additional socio-demographic information. The information was self-declared by voters. Only votes cast by those who explicitly described themselves as migrants living in Switzerland were evaluated. However, too few votes were entered to undertake a reliable analysis. The results presented here should therefore be explicitly understood as 'proof of concept'; only demonstrating what would be possible in a better utilised operation. For example, the data generated on baloti.ch could be compared with the VOX-surveys carried out after each Swiss referendum vote.

Other than the initiative on tax equality in November 2010 and the counter proposal to the expulsion initiative, the results from baloti.ch referendums never corresponded to the official Swiss results. We attributed this result to the small number of votes cast on baloti.ch and the fact that the website primarily attracted votes from political left-oriented circles. Our hypothesis, that with higher figures the baloti.ch result would have become comparable to the Swiss voting result, could unfortunately not be tested.

Even though we could not obtain any secure data, an analysis of voters separated into two groups, those who voted like the Swiss electorate and those who did not, provided some interesting patterns that could serve as initial premises for future works. For these analyses we summarised all voters across all five proposals.

Overall, the majority of migrants who voted on baloti.ch did not vote like the Swiss electorate. But at 54%, this majority is not at all clearly pronounced. Solely within the age and education criteria there were sub-categories of people who predominately voted in line with the Swiss electorate. In terms of age it was those in the younger age category, up to 39 years, while in the education category it was migrants with university degrees. In regard to the voter's gender, the tendency to vote differently to the Swiss electorate was likewise less clearly pronounced. In terms of the length of time migrants have lived in Switzerland, the tendency to vote the same as the Swiss electorate declined slightly as the length of time increased.

5. Conclusions

From an operational point of view the project baloti.ch was able to demonstrate in the form a proof of concept and several pilot votes that an integrated information and internet voting platform in eleven languages can be offered to an electorate. The platform's internet voting feature was used for referendum votes as well as for elections. The technical challenge for such a platform was considerable and more costly than initially expected but could be managed. Technology and translation issues could be overcome. The most difficult part, however, was to make the platform known to the target groups and to maintain the effort over a longer period of time. The user rates clearly show a deteriorating interest in the voting platform despite the increase in marketing and diffusion efforts.

Only 1'300 of the total 13'000 visitors of baloti.ch actually cast a vote on the four possible occasions to do so. To run such a platform as a permanent undertaking is

therefore not realistic. Even with more resources it is unlikely to attain much higher numbers of voters. The low number of voters seems to be a combination of a fading interest in a purely symbolic vote, inexperienced users getting lost during the request for a voting code and eventually fear of performing a manifestation (although encrypted) of political will via the Internet.

For future projects of such kind we therefore recommend to link the vote closer to the local context and to give it the character of a unique event rather than building up a permanent platform.

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