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

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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 migrants access and participation to one of the key 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.

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

Due to rather restrictive naturalisation laws about 20 per cent of the adult population in Switzerland is not part of the electorate (Caramani/Strijbis 2013: 399; Caroni 2013). In the French speaking part of Switzerland, however, and also in two German-speaking cantons, migrants are allowed to vote on local affairs, in the cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel even on cantonal matters. Recent attempts to introduce voting rights for migrants on the local level in additional cantons have all failed. Political debates on the topic are usually very controversial. The website baloti.ch[1] was created as an e-participation project in order to give the under- or unrepresented part of the Swiss population the opportunity to have a say in politics. The online platform baloti.ch was an attempt to give migrants in Switzerland the opportunity to become familiar with the 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 (Serdült 2014).

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

The information provided on each referendum on baloti.ch was translated into the eleven languages most spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Albanian, Serbian, Croatian and Tamil. To keep efforts within reasonable limits the texts on the platform were kept short. The vocabulary corresponded approximately to a lower secondary school level.

The platform contained the following information and parts:

- 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 data encryption (providing vote secrecy)

Data collection and analysis were anonymous. Personal data was not saved long-term or used for any reason other than statistical 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 only needed a valid email address in order to receive the encryption key for voting. To cover the technical side we cooperated with specialists from the Fachhochschule Bern (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.
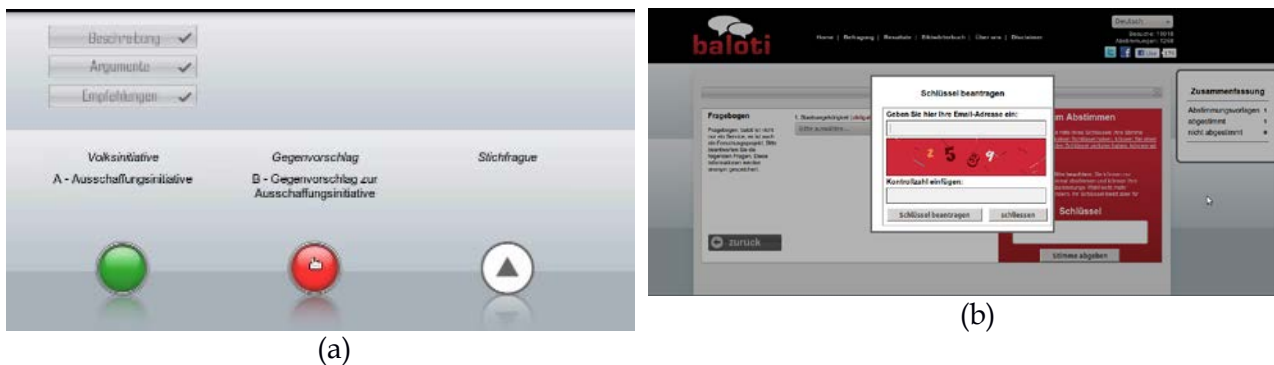

(a)   (b)

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 actual voting process was implemented 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 tie-breaker 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.

2. Diffusion campaign

Once the technical side of the voting system could be considered secure, the primary goal was to advertise the platform. We undertook 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 efforts are described below.

Television and Radio: At the beginning of the project there was a national television broadcast about baloti.ch during prime time news. 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 Fig. 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. In the further course of the project we used non-commercial local radio stations with foreign language broadcasting formats as additional diffusion partners.

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. We mainly cooperated with the daily newspaper 20 minutes (in print and online as well as in French and German). Understandably, the online coverage on 20min proved far superior to print. Visitor numbers on 20min online are high and the path to another website 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 Fig. 2).

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 very modest. Relatively few users voted repeatedly (see Tab. 2).

Multiplier Organisations: Migrant organisations as well as cantonal and city contact points for migrants were assessed as being valuable partners 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. Language schools with courses for migrants as well as cantonal and local migrant organisations were identified and asked to further promote the website. Whether a promotion of the website actually took place could not be verified easily.

Facebook Campaign: In order to reach more people, especially a younger audience we started a Facebook page during the end of the project. 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. The campaign ran from 6-23 October 2011. 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 when something was shared or published the hits increased substantially. With a total of 24 new 'likes' we had 128 'fans' by 23 October. However, on the whole, the impact was still modest given the actual effort. The advertisement taken out from 21-23 October was displayed 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. 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 to speak of a successful mobilisation effect. Furthermore, the increased activity on the Facebook page says nothing about the user's actual behaviour on the *baloti* website.

3. 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 2). 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 (corresponding to the total number of visits in Tab. 1), during which time frame the daily average increased to 142. The busiest day registered 1,837 visits, due to the previously mentioned television broadcast.

Figure 2: Number of visitors to baloti.ch according to Google Analytics

From the visitor statistics it becomes evident that, despite increased marketing efforts including Facebook campaigns at the end of the pilot phase, the interest in *baloti.ch* decreased steadily over time. However, on the positive side, it can be mentioned that the platform attracted visitors from all regions and migrant languages spoken in Switzerland.

Table 1: Technical indicators for the voting process

Vote	Type	Visits	Visits/day	Visitors	Start	End	% Start	% End
Sept 2010	1 vote	3'531	252	3'025	2'640	359	87.3	13.6
Nov 2010	3 votes	4'555	215	3'505	2'617	327	74.7	12.5
Feb 2011	1 vote	2'849	129	2'372	1'136	360	47.9	31.7
Oct 2011	1 election	1'168	42	1'006	544	154	54.1	28.3

The main goal of baloti.ch was to have those people who visited the website casting a vote. We therefore defined indicators allowing us to understand user behaviour and to evaluate to what extent we achieved our goals (see Tab. 1 and 2). Of those people who 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 1 are the problems that arose during the voting process on the occasion of the referendums in 2010, and in particular for the one in November with three ballot questions.

Table 2: Percent of repeated voting on baloti.ch across the four votes

Participating	Number of 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 (see Tab. 2). 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 usability issues (user ignorance or difficulties with the application of the website) or due to other reasons (lack of diffusion or interest, distrust, etc.). This research was not able to be carried out during the pilot. 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

During 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 declared themselves as migrants living in Switzerland were evaluated. However, too few votes were entered to undertake a reliable statistical analysis.

With the exception of two votes, the results from baloti.ch referendums never corresponded to the official Swiss results. We attributed this outcome 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 voting result of Swiss citizens, could unfortunately not be tested.

Even though we could not obtain enough data, an analysis of voters separated into two groups only, 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 of a proof of concept and several pilot votes that an integrated information and internet voting platform in eleven languages could be provided. 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 the website 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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