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# Code voting: when simplicity meets security

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**Abstract.** The Swiss Chancellery has developed highly demanding requirements in terms of security for electronic voting. A few protocols have been proposed that meet the requirements.

We propose a very simple protocol that satisfies the Swiss requirements while achieving an additional property: secrecy against a dishonest voting device, thanks to code voting. One key feature of our protocol is to use very short codes (typically one or two digits), so that it can be easily used by voters. Moreover, it only relies on standard primitives. Using the tool ProVerif, we formally prove vote privacy and end-to-end verifiability under the trust model of the Swiss Chancellery, assuming a dishonest voting device.

**Keywords:** Internet Voting · Code Voting · Privacy · Verifiability · Switzerland

## 1 Introduction

Electronic voting is used in several countries, such as Australia [8], Estonia [21], Switzerland [38], or France [16]. It aims at preserving the same properties as traditional paper-ballots elections and in particular two main properties, namely vote privacy and verifiability: the result of the election should reflect the votes of all legitimate voters. Verifiability is often divided into several sub-properties such as cast-as-intended, individual, universal, and eligibility verifiability [28].

All these properties come with trust assumptions on the parties involved in the protocol. Such assumptions vary a lot depending on the voting system. For example, some systems such as Helios [1], Belenios [15], or Civitas [12] consider a fully dishonest voting server but assume a public Bulletin Board that anyone can see and trust [22]. Another approach followed in Estonia [21] and Switzerland [38] is to maintain a private bulletin board, distributed over several online servers, among which only one is trusted. Another important element of a voting system is the voting device, which is assumed to be trusted or untrusted depending on the protocol.

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*Dishonest voting device.* Securing Internet voting against a dishonest voting device is a challenging task. A versatile approach is the Benaloh’s challenge [2], which allows a voter to check that their vote has been properly encrypted. This approach is, however, hard to use in practice [32]. In the Estonian system [21] or with CAISED [35], voters are offered the possibility to use a second device to control the behavior of their main voting device. In Switzerland, the voters are given a voting sheet before the start of the election that contains a *return code* for each voting option [38]. Then, when a voter selects some voting option  $v$  on their voting device, they should be displayed the corresponding return code. This mechanism guarantees their vote has been correctly transmitted since the voting device cannot guess the return codes.

However, all these solutions only focus on cast-as-intended: even if the voting device is compromised, the voter’s *intended* vote should be correctly encrypted and sent to the voting server. None of these approaches protect against vote privacy: a dishonest voting device immediately learns the voter’s vote since the vote is entered in clear by the voter. This yields an uncomfortable situation where a device is trusted for one key property (vote privacy) but not the other one (verifiability). A few systems overcome this issue using *code voting* introduced by Chaum [10]: a voter no longer enters their vote in clear but transmits a voting code instead, so the voting device does not learn the vote.

*Swiss context.* The Swiss Chancellery [18] is highly demanding in terms of security for Internet voting. The specification should be fully public, as well as the code of the system. Public scrutiny is encouraged through bug bounty programs. In the Swiss approach, the voting sheets distributed to voters are generated by a trusted **Setup Component**, in collaboration with **Control Components**. When a voter votes, their **Voting Device** encrypts their vote and sends the ciphertext to the control components, which intuitively play the role of a distributed voting server. The control components collaboratively compute the corresponding return code, which is sent back to the voter, who will confirm their vote only if the return code is correct.

As defined by the Swiss Chancellery, verifiability should hold even if the attacker controls the network, all the online control components but one, and the voting device. For vote privacy, the trust assumptions are similar, except the voting device is now trusted. Our goal is to suppress this assumption.

*Our contribution.* Our main contribution is a voting protocol that satisfies the security requirements of the Swiss Chancellery (vote privacy and verifiability) without assuming a trusted voting device, even for vote privacy. A recent proposal [19] aims at the same goal, relying on BLS signatures [7] and long voting codes. Comparing to it, we show that it is possible to obtain the same security guarantees using a radically different approach, with very short voting codes of typically 1 or 2 digits. Interestingly, our protocol is very simple in terms of design and cryptographic primitives. Besides homomorphic encryption or verifiable mixnets for the tally, it only uses very standard cryptographic primitives, such

as signatures and hashes. We believe our protocol can easily be implemented and maintained, even by programmers with a light background in cryptography.

In addition to removing the trust in the voting device, we mitigate one of the strongest trust assumptions of the Swiss context: the trusted setup component. This component is trusted both for vote privacy and verifiability. We keep this assumption but our protocol is designed in such a way that the computations of SC are minimal and easy to audit. In particular, it does not need to generate any randomness. Hence, it is easy to check that the output corresponds to the input, with no additional information or bias introduced through the randomness. So, if the SC misbehaves, it can be caught through random audits. Moreover, a malicious setup could use well-chosen randomness to leak information. In our design, we remove the use of randomness in the core design of the setup, hence limiting the risk of covert channels. The use of randomness is limited to external components, e.g., to implement authenticated channels with signatures.

Finally, we provide a full security proof of both vote privacy and verifiability using the ProVerif [5] tool, for an arbitrary number of voters and an arbitrary number of elections. For verifiability, we rely on a recent framework [13], that allows to directly prove end-to-end verifiability, that is, proving that the final result accounts for all the votes of honest voters, plus at most one vote per dishonest voters. Directly verifying end-to-end verifiability avoids the need to consider several sub-properties (e.g., cast-as-intended, recorded-as-cast), at the risk of missing an important property [30].

*Outline of the paper.* In the next section, we further discuss other voting protocols based on code voting. Our protocol is presented in Section 3, and we explain its security model and proof in ProVerif in Section 4. Some concluding remarks are in Section 5.

## 2 Related work

In the Swiss context, two main protocols have been proposed, namely CHVote [20] and the one developed by Swiss Post [38]. However, both assume that the voting device is trusted for vote privacy. In the literature, a few systems have been proposed to achieve vote privacy against a dishonest voting device, using code voting, following the seminal work of Chaum [10]. Among them, only one, HKL [19], has been designed specifically for the Swiss context, i.e., with the aim to satisfy the Swiss trust assumptions. Others have been designed in a more general context. Hence, their different trust assumptions led to different design compromises. We discuss here the systems that aim at protecting vote privacy against a dishonest voting device.

*Comparison to HKL protocol [19].* In the HKL protocol, voters receive a voting sheet in which each voting option is associated to a QR-code, that encodes the encrypted vote. Thanks to a verifiable mixnet during the setup, the relation between the ciphertext and its plain vote remains private for anyone without

access to the voting sheet. BLS signatures [7], based on pairing, are then used to prevent ballot stuffing.

One major drawback of this approach is its usability. Indeed, in Switzerland, a voter typically needs to answer about 6 questions, and for several questions, 3 options can be selected (yes, no, abstain). This would amount to selecting 6 QR-codes out of 18 for a typical election. But some elections have more questions (e.g., 13 questions in Zurich in autumn 2022 [26,37], therefore amounting to 39 QR-codes) and some elections even offer voters to select *several* options for each question [25]. Moreover, because the camera used to scan the QR-code(s) shall not see the other cryptographic data printed onto the voting sheet for security purposes, the voter is subject to additional constraints when manipulating the voting sheet. Recent studies [40,33] conclude that QR-codes are usable for electronic voting when voters select exactly *one* voting option in total, but it seems cumbersome to use such a technology in elections where voters have to select more than a few options.

Compared to HKL, our protocol is QR-code-free (exception, optionally, for the first step). Voters only need to enter a short code for each question: if a question has 15 possible answers, then the voter simply needs to enter a number between 1 and 15. The association between these small codes and the corresponding encrypted votes is committed by the setup component and audited by auditors before the start of the election. The return codes guarantee that the voting device cannot modify the voting code without being detected. Studies have also explored the usability of entering voting codes [33,29], and even though the voting codes were longer than in our proposal (8 numbers in [33], and 3 characters in [29]), reached acceptable usability scores.

*Comparison to non-Swiss specific systems.* Outside the Swiss context, BeleniosVS [14] follows the same approach as HKL: the code is simply the encrypted vote. However, BeleniosVS assumes in addition that voters can access a public Bulletin Board. Unfortunately, existing techniques to implement a secure public Bulletin Board [22] typically assume a signature mechanism. Since a voter cannot check the validity of a signature by themselves, they need to rely on their voting device to do so. Assuming the voting device dishonest as in our setting, it may simply lie to the voter. Therefore, an approach based on a public Bulletin Board does not seem to be a realistic option under our trust assumptions.

Pretty Good Democracy (PGD) [36] uses long, hard to guess, codes for each voting choice, that intuitively points to the right encrypted vote in the data prepared during setup. In PGD, if the attacker knows another code, it may swap votes. While long codes may be acceptable when only one vote is expressed, this does not fit well in the Swiss context. Furthermore, the control components (the trustees in the PGD setting) need to be trusted for verifiability, as they may lie on how they shifted the ciphertexts during the setup. Pretty Understandable Democracy (PUD) [9] also uses pointers to ciphertexts. The voter needs to enter several codes for each voting option, received from different voting sheets, one from each server (these servers intuitively correspond to the Swiss control components). This may again be very cumbersome in practice. The VeryVote

system [24] shifts the trust from the voting device to the voting server that (intuitively) encrypts the vote for the voter, but in a verifiable manner. The authors later extend their approach to remove the trust in the voting server [23], but at the cost of a secure hardware token on the voter side, hence trusting again some part of the voting device.

All these systems use either voting codes which need to be resistant to random guessing or encode directly the ciphertext or signatures. This results into long voting codes in the order of 128 bits or even more. To our knowledge, the only scheme that uses short voting codes, hence in the order of number of candidates, is D-Demos [11]. As in our proposal, the voting code simply points to the right ciphertext, and the number of needed voting codes is simply the number of voting options. D-DEMOS uses a double-ballot system, where the voter chooses which ballot to audit and which one to use for voting, which leads to a slightly more complex system. Moreover, D-Demos assumes a public Bulletin Board, which tends to discard it for real-world usages under our trust assumptions as discussed above. Finally, their setup component has to generate a lot of cryptographic, randomized, material, which may be hard to audit.

Table 1 displays a comparison of the existing code voting systems that do not assume any trust in the voting device. We first compare their security (privacy and verifiability) for different trust models. We highlight the trust model of the Swiss Chancellery and our trust model. For the sake of comparison, we also display the two main systems that have been designed for the Swiss context, namely Swiss Post [38] and CHVote [20]. None of them achieve privacy against an insecure voting device but in contrast, they achieve a better verifiability level than code voting when the setup component is dishonest but the voting device is trusted (a scenario outside the Swiss trust model).

We also compare the systems in terms of usability and auditability. We pinpoint which systems use short voting codes and which are “vote and go”; that is, a voter simply needs to interact with the system during the voting phase, and does not need to come back afterward, e.g., to check that their vote has been counted. In terms of auditability and simplicity, we highlight systems that use a deterministic setup and do not use cryptography on the voting device. We also remark that most papers focus on the design of the system and do not accompany it with a security proof of verifiability, vote privacy, or both.

|                                | Swiss Setting |                |             |          | Voting Codes Systems |            |                 |                    |                  |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|----------|----------------------|------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
|                                | SPP<br>[38]   | CHVote<br>[20] | HKL<br>[19] | Proposal | PGD<br>[36]          | PUD<br>[9] | D-DEMOS<br>[11] | BeleniosVS<br>[14] | VeryVote<br>[24] |
| <b>Trust for Vote privacy</b>  |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    |                  |
| <i>1/n CC, SC, VD</i>          | •             | •              | •           | •        | •                    | •          | •               | •                  |                  |
| <i>1/n CC, SC</i>              |               |                | •           | •        | •                    | •          | •               | •                  |                  |
| 1/n CC, VD                     |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 | •                  |                  |
| 1/n CC                         |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    |                  |
| <b>Trust for Verifiability</b> |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    |                  |
| 1/n CC, SC, VD                 | •             | •              | •           | •        |                      | •          | •               | •                  | •                |
| <i>1/n CC, SC</i>              | •             | •              | •           | •        |                      | •          | •               | •                  | •                |
| 1/n CC, VD                     | •             | •              |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    | •                |
| 1/n CC                         |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    | •                |
| <b>Security Proof</b>          |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    |                  |
| Privacy                        | •             |                |             | •        |                      |            | •               | •                  |                  |
| Verifiability                  | •             | •              |             | •        |                      |            | •               | •                  |                  |
| <b>Construction</b>            |               |                |             |          |                      |            |                 |                    |                  |
| Short Voting Codes             |               |                |             | •        |                      |            | •               |                    |                  |
| Deterministic SC               |               | •              | •           | •        | •                    |            |                 |                    |                  |
| Vote and go                    | •             | •              | •           | •        | •                    | •          |                 |                    |                  |
| No Crypto on VD                |               |                | •           | •        | •                    | •          | •               |                    |                  |

**Table 1.** Comparison of code voting systems.

Block one and two describe scenarios with different trust assumptions for vote privacy and verifiability corresponding to the control components CC, the setup component SC and the voting device VD. The more components need to be trusted, the less secure is the protocol. In *italic* the Swiss trust model, and in gray our stronger trust model (we no longer assume a trusted voting device for privacy). **•**: these protocols assume a public bulletin board that voters can securely access. This implicitly assumes some trusted device.

In PGD, all control components need to be honest for verifiability, as they may lie on how they shifted the ciphertexts during the setup. In VeryVote, the server is trusted to encrypt the candidate for the voter, which is a stronger assumption than the ones we consider here.

### 3 Protocol

We first recall the voting infrastructure of the Swiss context. We then describe our protocol and its main security properties.

#### 3.1 The Swiss context

The Swiss Chancellery has precisely defined the main actors of a voting system in the Swiss context, with associated communication channels. We summarize the given model as follows.

The **Setup Component** is active during the setup. It computes the voting material and distributes it to the voters through postal mail. It also prepares the material used to tally the votes.

The **Control Components** are entities that are active during all the voting phases. They collectively generate the randomness used during the setting, register the votes and compute return codes during the voting phase, and gather the encrypted ballots for the tally phase.

The **Decryption Authorities** are in charge of generating the public key of the election and decrypting during the tally. Typically, a threshold of  $t$  out of  $n$  authorities is necessary to decrypt.

The **Voting Device** interacts with the **Voter** to help them cast a vote over the Internet.

The voting device does not communicate directly with the control components. Instead, all communications go through a **Voting Server** that is fully untrusted and simply sends the messages back and forth from the voting devices and the control components. Therefore, we will omit its description in what follows.

*Trust assumptions.* We consider the trust model as defined by the Swiss Chancellery [18].

The network is fully under the control of the attacker. In particular, the security of the protocol cannot rely on TLS. However, postal mail from the setup component to the voter is assumed to be trusted: the attacker can neither read nor tamper with the voting sheets sent to the voters.

The setup component is assumed to be fully trusted. It is only active during the setup phase and does not need to be online. The voting material (the voting sheets) is sent over secure channels to the voters (in practice, by Post). The control components are typically a set of 4 entities, among which only one is trusted for verifiability and vote privacy. The decryption authorities are trusted as a whole, with a threshold of trusted authorities. Finally, the voting device is untrusted for verifiability but trusted for privacy in the trust model of the Chancellery. This is, however, the point where our trust assumptions differ: we no longer assume the voting device to be honest for privacy.

Moreover, the Chancellery's model places a lot of trust in the setup component since it is trusted both for privacy and verifiability. This is something that we mitigate in our protocol by proposing a fully deterministic process, easy to audit.




### 3.2 Voter's view

To introduce the protocol, we first present the voter's view. The voter is given a ballot sheet with a QR code to login, and codes to cast and confirm their vote. See Figure 1 for an example using realistic parameters (e.g., length of codes). First, the voter scans the QR code to login ① with her identifier  $Id$ . The QR code contains the URL of the voting server, reducing the chance that the voter ends up on the wrong page. Then, the voter enters the short voting codes  $c_1, \dots, c_n$  of the voting choices they intend to vote for ②. The voting codes are sent to the voting system, which responds with return codes  $rc_1, \dots, rc_n$ , one for each selected voting option (codes for blank votes shall be provided). If and only if these codes match what is printed on the voting sheet ②, the voter is instructed to confirm the vote ③ by sending the authentication code  $ac$ . This is the only long secret value that authenticates the voter. The voter finally receives a finalization code  $fc$ , that guarantees them that their vote has been counted.

The voting client essentially needs to forward values to the voting system and back to the user. It does not need to encrypt or sign the vote. The voting client may guide the user with basic validation (e.g., ensuring the voting code entered for the first question is between 1 and 3).

① **Start**

Scan to open the election platform and login:



Then you can cast your Vote ②.

② **Vote**

Do you want to accept the popular initiative  
"Lower Voting Age to Sixteen Years"

|                | Vote | Verify |
|----------------|------|--------|
| <b>Yes</b>     | 3    | ADEH   |
| <b>No</b>      | 1    | KYSO   |
| <b>Abstain</b> | 2    | KKHA   |

Do you want to accept the federal law  
"Electronic Identification (eID Act)"

|                | Vote | Verify |
|----------------|------|--------|
| <b>Yes</b>     | 4    | FSUM   |
| <b>No</b>      | 6    | PINQ   |
| <b>Abstain</b> | 5    | UAQM   |

Enter Vote numbers to cast the vote.  
Afterwards, check Verify letters are shown.

If Verify letters match, then Confirm ③.  
**If Verify letters do not match, abort.**

③ **Confirm**

If Verify letters match, enter Authentication:

**F28Q nAJcj 6W3f C5CXt vwfa**

---

Afterwards, check Finalization is shown:

**JQHS UMKQ**

If Finalization shown, your vote is stored.  
**If Finalization is not shown, call 114.**

**Fig. 1.** An example of a voting sheet using realistic parameters. ① contains a QR code with the voter id. ② contains the voting codes and their respective return code. ③ contains the authentication code and the respective finalization.

### 3.3 Protocol description

The protocol is divided into three phases. In the setup phase, all parties receive the required cryptographic material to run the voting and tally phase. In the voting phase, the voter submits their vote and performs their individual verifiability checks. In the final tally phase, the votes are decrypted and counted. For simplicity, we present our protocol for an election with one question only, but it can easily be extended to several questions (e.g., the voting sheet presented in Figure 1 has two questions).

*Notations.* We denote  $\mathbb{Z}_n$  or  $[1, n]$  the set of integers between 1 and  $n$  and  $\oplus_n$  the addition modulo  $n$ . If  $n$  is obvious from the context, we may omit it. The set of all possible permutations of  $\mathbb{Z}_n$  is denoted  $S_n$ . The composition of two permutations  $\pi_1$  and  $\pi_2$  is denoted  $\pi_1 \circ \pi_2$ .

The set of voting options is denoted  $\mathcal{V}$  and is of size  $n_v$ . The correspondence between voting options and voting codes will be denoted by a substitution (or a table)  $\sigma$  from  $\mathcal{V}$  to  $\mathbb{Z}_{n_v}$ . The application of a substitution  $\sigma$  to an element  $v \in \mathcal{V}$  is denoted  $\sigma[v]$ . We assume an *initial correspondence*  $\sigma_0$ , chosen publicly by the authorities, that maps each voting option to some integer in  $\mathbb{Z}_n$ . This substitution is fixed for all voters. For example, if  $\mathcal{V} = \{a, b, c\}$ , the initial substitution could be  $\sigma_0 = \{a \rightarrow 1, b \rightarrow 2, c \rightarrow 3\}$ .

*Cryptographic primitives.* Our protocol relies on three standard primitives.

- a hash function `hash`,
- a signature scheme. We denote  $\sigma = \text{sign}(sk, m, r)$  the signature with signing key  $sk$ , message  $m$  and randomness  $r$ . Similarly, we denote  $\text{verify}(pk, m, \sigma)$  the verification applied to public key  $pk$ , message  $m$  and signature  $\sigma$ . We write  $\text{sign}(sk, m)$  when the source of randomness  $r$  is clear from the context.
- an encryption scheme compatible with a homomorphic tally or a mixnet, such as the one used in Helios [1]. We denote  $E = \text{enc}(pk, m, r)$  for the encryption of message  $m$  with public key  $pk$  and randomness  $r$ .

**Setup** Before the setup, we assume that the authorities have agreed on a list of identifiers  $\mathbf{Id}$ , one for each eligible voter. The identifiers are used to keep track of the cryptographic material per voter, and they are not assumed to be secret.

We also assume given  $n_{rc}$  the number of return codes,  $n_a$  the number of authentication codes, and  $n_f$  the number of finalization codes. For return and finalization codes, the adversary has a single try to convince the voter, hence the values do not need to be hard to guess. Typically,  $n_{rc}$  and  $n_f$  will be of medium size (e.g., 4 digits, that is  $n_{rc} = n_f = 10^4$ ). Regarding authentication codes, corrupted parties will have access to their hashes, so this set must be large enough for picked values to be hard to brute-force. Hence typically  $n_a = 2^{128}$ . Lastly, we assume given  $\mathbb{Z}_{n_r}$ , the set from which encryption randomness is drawn.

*Key generation.* The decryption authorities jointly generate the election public key  $pk_E$ , using a Distributed Key Generation, for example, the one used in Belenios [15] or ElectionGuard [3]. They each have a share of the decryption key such that  $k$  out of  $n$  authorities can decrypt.

We also assume that each control component  $CC_i$  has a signing key  $sk_i$ , with associated public verification key  $vk_i$ .

*Preparation of the voting sheets.* During the setup, the setup component is in charge of sending to each voter:

- their identifier  $Id$ ,
- a correspondence  $\sigma$  between voting options and voting codes,
- a table  $t$  that maps each voting option to a return code,
- an authentication code  $ac$ ,
- a finalization code  $fc$ .

To obtain a deterministic setup component, each control component generates for each  $Id \in \mathbf{Id}$ :

- a randomly chosen correspondence  $\pi_i$  between voting options and voting codes,
- a table  $t_i$  that maps each voting option to a randomly chosen return code,
- a table  $r_i$  that maps each voting code to a randomly chosen encryption randomness,
- a random authentication code  $ac_i$ ,
- a random finalization code  $fc_i$ .

Then, the setup component simply combines the contributions of all  $m$  control components:

- $\sigma = \sigma_0 \circ \pi$  where  $\pi = \circ_{i=1}^m \pi_i$ : the initial correspondence  $\sigma_0$  is permuted using the combination  $\pi$  of the permutations  $\pi_i$  chosen by the  $CC_i$ ,
- $t = \Sigma_{i=1}^m t_i$ ,
- $r = \oplus_{i=1}^m r_i$ ,
- $ac = \Sigma_{i=1}^m ac_i$ ,
- $fc = \Sigma_{i=1}^m fc_i$ ,

where  $\oplus$  denotes the bitwise exclusive-OR operator, and  $\Sigma_{i=1}^m x_i = x_1 + \dots + x_m \bmod N$  with  $N$  defined from the context (e.g.,  $N = n_{rc}$  when computing  $t$ ,  $N = n_a$  for  $ac$ , and  $N = n_f$  for  $fc$ ). By abuse of notation, when operands are tables, the operator is applied for each index.

Additionally, the setup returns to the control components:

- $h = \text{hash}(ac)$ , the hashed authentication code,
- a table  $te$  from the voting codes to the corresponding (encrypted) voting options

$$\{c \rightarrow \text{enc}(pk_E, \sigma^{-1}[c], r[c]) \mid c \in \mathbb{Z}_{n_v}\}$$

using the XORed randomness received from the  $CC_i$ .

The setup phase is depicted in Figure 2, as well as the remainder of the protocol.

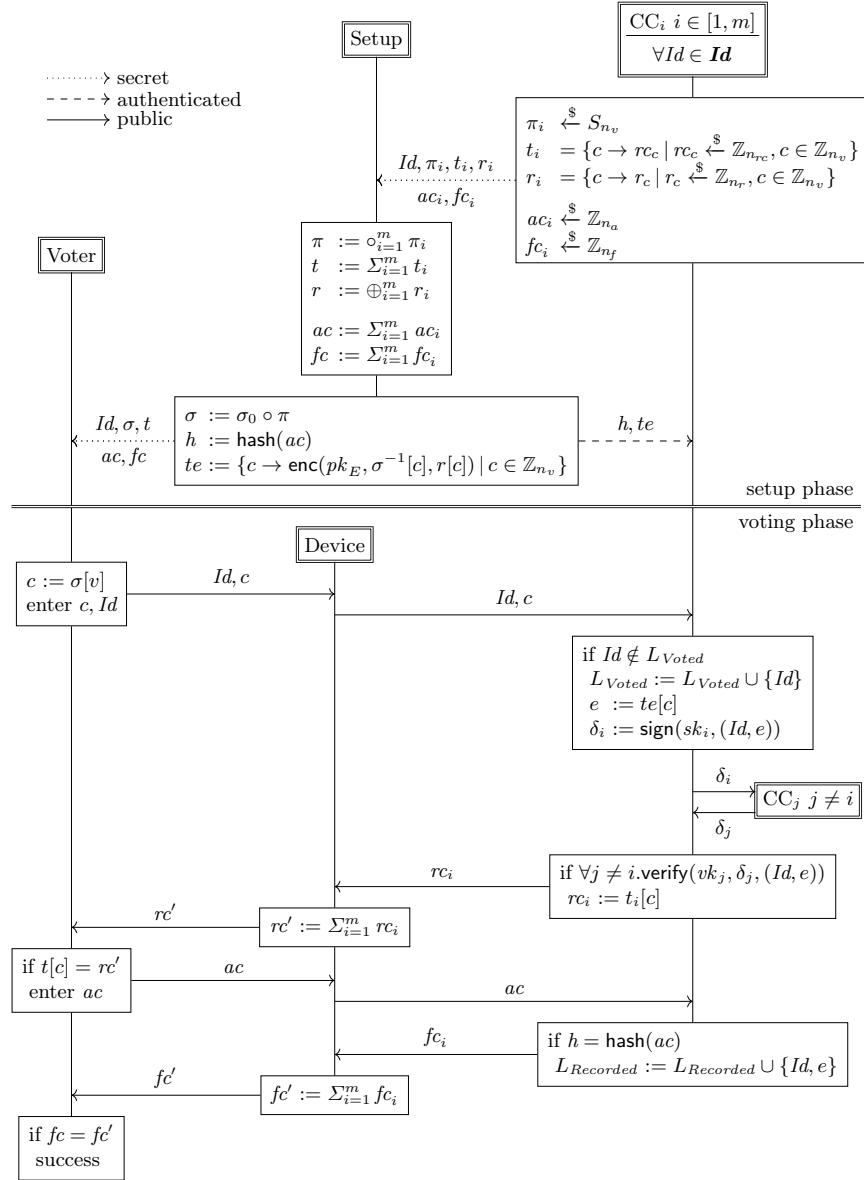


Fig. 2. Protocol.

**Audit of the setup component** The setup component needs to be fully trusted. Notably, it could switch the vote and verification codes of plain votes, such that a different voting option is voted for than the one intended. We introduce an audit procedure to improve the detection of a misbehaving setup component.

To make an audit of the setup component practical, we ensure it only runs deterministic algorithms. Note that if at least one control component performs honestly, the adversary has no advantage in guessing the ballots.

To audit the setup component, we first note that the identifiers in  $\mathbf{Id}$  are not tied to voters. They are just numbers (possibly randomly chosen). Hence, when preparing the election, the authorities simply add  $n$  additional entries to  $\mathbf{Id}$ , for  $n$  chosen in such a way that if  $n$  voters are audited, the risk is sufficiently minimized. After the setup component finishes execution, each control component  $i$  chooses some subset of voters to audit  $\mathbf{Id}_A^{(i)} \subset \mathbf{Id}$  such that  $|\cup_i \mathbf{Id}_A^{(i)}| = n$ . Any corresponding  $Id$  can no longer be used to cast votes, but instead, the control components publish all values they generated for this  $Id$ . The control components then assert that the voting sheet,  $h$ , and  $te$  have been generated correctly. Finally, the remaining voting sheets are randomly assigned to voters, to prevent targeted attacks on specific  $Ids$  from the setup and control components.

**Voting phase** The voter cast their vote by interacting with the control components.

- The voters first select the voting code  $c$  corresponding to their vote  $v$  and they simply enter  $c$  together with their identifier  $Id$  to their voting device.
- Each control component checks that they did not receive  $Id$  yet, signs  $Id$  together with the ciphertext  $e$  corresponding to  $c$  in their table  $te$ , and sends this signature to the other control components. Once the control component has received corresponding signatures back from all other control components, it sends their share  $rc_i$  of the return code.
- The voting device combines the return codes and displays  $rc = \sum_{i=1}^m rc_i$  to the voter. If the voter agrees, they send their authentication code  $ac$ .
- Each control component checks that the code  $ac$  is valid by comparing it to its hashed value  $h$ . They now record the ciphertext  $e$  and  $Id$  in the list  $L_{Recorded}$  of recorded votes and they each send their share  $fc_i$  of the finalization code.
- The voting device displays the combination of the  $fc_i$  to the voter, which ends the voting phase.

At any time, if the voter detects some inconsistency, they should contact the voting authorities, who then offer other means of voting.

*Multiple voting options.* For simplicity, we considered the selection of one voting option only. In case the voter has to select  $k$  out of  $n$  options, then the voter simply sends the  $k$  corresponding voting codes, the control components return  $k$  return codes and the protocol runs accordingly. In case the voter may select *up to*  $k$  out of  $n$  options, we use the same approach as for other Swiss systems:

we add  $k$  blank options so that the voter always selects  $k$  options, possibly with some blank ones. The voter hence has to send  $k$  voting codes and check  $k$  return codes, even if they vote for less than  $k$  actual candidates.

Several questions can easily be supported using different code voting names. For example, the voting sheet provided in Figure 1 corresponds to an election with two questions, of 3 voting options each. How to adapt our protocol to cover more complex electoral rules, where a ballot may be further constrained (e.g., when at least one non-blank candidate needs to be selected) is left as future work.

**Tally phase** At the end of the voting phase, each control component has a list of recorded votes  $L_{Recorded}$  which need to be tallied. Ideally, all control components should have the same  $L_{Recorded}$  in their local state. However, dishonest control components might have added, modified, or dropped entries in their local  $L_{Recorded}$ , hence the control components need to agree on their list  $L_{Recorded}$  of encrypted votes.

*Agreement procedure.* To establish  $L_{Agreed}$ , each control component  $CC_i$  sends  $L_{Recorded}$  with the “proof” for each entry (that is,  $ac$  and signatures over  $(Id, e)$ ) to all other control components  $CC_j$ . Each control component then defines  $L_{Agreed}$  to be  $L_{Recorded}$ , in which they add any  $e$  such that

- they received a valid signature  $\text{sign}(sk_j, (Id, e))$  from each  $CC_j$ ,
- $h$  is associated to  $Id$  and  $h = \text{hash}(ac)$ .

After this step, all control components agree, or they can detect who is misbehaving.

*Tally procedure.* After establishing  $L_{Agreed}$ , the decryption authorities execute the tally procedure with the ciphertext given by  $L_{Agreed}$  as input. We leave this step abstract as our protocol can support both a homomorphic tally [1] or a mixnet-based tally [17]. In both cases, the decryption authorities provide verifiable proof of correct tally.

### 3.4 Security claims

Our protocol satisfies all the security requirements of the Swiss Chancellery, even if the voting device is dishonest. More precisely, our protocol guarantees vote privacy, even when the attacker controls the voting device, all but one control component, and less than  $t$  decryption authorities. Our protocol also ensures verifiability, even when the attacker controls the voting device and all but one control component. In particular, it guarantees cast-as-intended and vote privacy against a dishonest voting device.

### 3.5 Design Rationale

In this section, we give an intuitive explanation why our protocol guarantees the verifiability and privacy in our trust model. We provide formal proofs in Section 4.

*Verifiability* A correct return code  $rc$  in the first roundtrip guarantees that the voting code  $c$  cast by the voter  $Id$  has been received by all control components.  $rc$  can only be reconstructed if all control components publish their  $rc_i$ . The honest control component will only publish the corresponding  $rc_i$  if  $c$  is indeed the first vote of that voter, and it has received signatures over  $(Id, e)$  for  $e = te[c]$  of all other control components. We assume the adversary unable to guess  $rc_i$  or forge signatures.

A correct finalization code  $fc$  in the second roundtrip guarantees that only votes are tallied for which the first roundtrip was successful.  $fc$  can only be reconstructed if all control components publish their  $fc_i$ . The honest control component will only publish  $fc_i$  if it has seen  $ac$ , which is in turn only published by the voter when  $rc$  of the previous roundtrip was correct. We assume the adversary unable to guess  $fc_i$  or  $ac$ .

Finally, for the vote  $e$  to enter the tally, there are two conditions: there must exist a signature over  $(Id, e)$  from all control components, and  $ac$  must be known. If the voter has seen a correct finalization code, the honest control component is in possession of these values, therefore guarantees inclusion of  $e$  in the tally. Furthermore, the fact that  $ac$  is known implies that  $rc$  was valid, which in turn implies that the corresponding  $c$  has been received by all control components. The verifiable tally procedure then ensures the vote is not modified during the tally.

*Privacy* We first collect which values learned by the adversary depend on the selected voting option. When the voter has chosen their plain vote  $v$ , they then map it to the voting code  $c := \sigma[v]$ , hence  $c$  clearly depends on  $v$ . The other values that depend on  $v$  are the corresponding partial return codes  $rc_i := t_i[c]$ , and the encrypted vote  $e := te[c]$ . All the other values, including those from other voters, are independent (i.e. remain the same if the voter would chose a different  $v'$ ).

The adversary cannot relate  $c$  to its corresponding  $v$ , as it does not know  $\sigma$ , and cannot reconstruct  $\pi$  (as  $\pi_i$  of the honest control component is unknown to the adversary). The adversary cannot learn additional information from  $rc_i$ , as they were randomly chosen. Further, the adversary is unable to decrypt  $e$  as at least one decryption authority is assumed honest. The privacy-preserving tally procedure then ensures that the adversary does not learn anything about  $v$ , apart from the result of the election.

## 4 Security analysis

In order to study the security of our protocol, we conducted a formal security analysis using the automatic prover ProVerif.

### 4.1 ProVerif in a nutshell

ProVerif [5,6] is an automatic tool designed to conduct security analyses of cryptographic protocols. Protocols are modeled in a symbolic model: messages are abstracted with terms modeling an idealized cryptography. For instance, as soon as the attacker does not know the decryption key, a ciphertext is perfectly hiding its plain message. Protocol roles are modeled with processes that define how messages are exchanged between the participants and which checks are done upon receiving a message. Processes are made of commands that describe the different actions of a participant:  $\text{in}(c, x)$  models the input of a message  $x$  on a channel  $c$ ,  $\text{out}(c, u)$  the output of message  $u$  on channel  $c$ ,  $\text{if } b \text{ then } P \text{ else } Q$  models a test. Other commands exist to model protocol states, parallel execution or replication of roles, fresh term generation, and more. Finally, ProVerif models a Dolev-Yao attacker controlling the network: the attacker learns all messages exchanged between participants on public channels and can modify them, block them, or forge new ones. This attacker usually over-approximates the behavior of a concrete attacker. It can also behave as a dishonest participant of the protocol as soon as it is given the corresponding secret material.

Regarding security properties, ProVerif supports both reachability and equivalence properties. In the context of electronic voting, reachability properties are used in particular to model verifiability: for all executions, the outcome of the election corresponds to the intended votes. Equivalence properties model that an attacker cannot distinguish between two different scenarios. This is typically used to model vote privacy.

Other tools, such as Tamarin [34] or CPSA [31], have also been developed for the analysis of security protocols. We chose ProVerif because it has already been successfully applied to voting protocols in the Swiss setting [39] and because it offers a framework [13] for proving end-to-end verifiability. Unfortunately, such a framework does not exist to prove vote privacy. Hence, we defined our own model, combining the protocol roles previously defined in the verifiability framework.

### 4.2 Modeling the protocol and security properties

**Protocol.** The first step to prove the security of the protocol is to describe its different roles (voter, setup component and control component). Because the voting device is always assumed dishonest in the scenarios we want to consider, we do not model it. Instead, this role will be under the control of the implicit attacker of the symbolic model. In the same way, we model only one control component, the others being assumed dishonest, too. Moreover, for the sake of simplicity, we model a setup component that interacts with only one dishonest control component, which mimics the behavior of all the dishonest ones.



```

1      (* voter who casts and verifies *)
2      let Voter(id: id_t, voting_choice: voting_choice_t) =
3
4          (* read out voting material *)
5          get VoteState(=id, =voting_choice, vote_code, return_code) in
6          get AuthenticateState(=id, authentication_code, finalization_code) in
7
8          (* cast the vote and raise Voted event *)
9          out(c, (id, vote_code));
10         event Voted(id, voting_choice);
11
12         (* if the return code matches, then authenticate the vote *)
13         in(c, return_code': xor_t);
14         if return_code' = return_code then (
15             out(c, authentication_code);
16
17             (* if the finalization code matches, then raise Verified event *)
18             in(c, finalization_code': xor_t);
19             if finalization_code' = finalization_code then (
20                 event Verified(id, voting_choice)
21             )
22         )
23     .

```

**Fig. 3.** The voters' process.

We provide an excerpt of the voter role in Figure 3. We model the voting sheet as a table filled by the setup component, which the voter can read from using `get` in order to retrieve the appropriate voting code. Then, the voter sends the voting code together with their id. The voter expects back a return code, and if this return code is as expected, the voter sends the authentication code. The voter again expects back a finalization code, and again checks if this finalization code is as expected. After voting and after verification, the voter raises events which we use in the queries of our verifiability proof.

**Verifiability.** The framework developed by Cheval et al. in [13] aims at proving end-to-end verifiability: an electronic voting protocol satisfies end-to-end verifiability if for all execution traces,

$$result = V_{HV} \uplus V_{HNV} \uplus D$$

where *result* is the multiset of tallied votes,  $V_{HV}$  is the multiset of votes of honest voters who verify,  $V_{HNV}$  is a sub-multiset of the votes cast by honest voters who do not verify, and  $D$  contains at most one vote per dishonest voter.

Instantiating this definition to return code protocols, we say that a voter has voted if they have cast their voting code and received the expected return code. Moreover, we say that a voter has verified if they have sent the confirmation code and received the expected finalization code. Informally, end-to-end verifiability guarantees that the attacker cannot modify the plain vote cast by the voter, nor confirm a vote on their behalf. Moreover, the attacker cannot stuff the ballot box by impersonating voters or casting multiple ballots in their name.

**Vote privacy.** In [27], Kremer et al. define vote privacy as an equivalence property: an electronic voting protocol satisfies vote privacy if an attacker is not able to distinguish whether Alice votes for 0 and Bob for 1, or conversely, i.e.

$$\text{Voter}(\text{alice}, 0) \mid \text{Voter}(\text{bob}, 1) \mid P \approx \text{Voter}(\text{alice}, 1) \mid \text{Voter}(\text{bob}, 0) \mid P$$

where  $P$  denotes the roles of the protocol other than Alice’s and Bob’s, such as the setup component or the control component. For the sake of generality, we prove vote privacy assuming that  $P$  models an arbitrary number of dishonest voters.

**Modeling choices.** Even if our modeling is close to the protocol description provided in Section 3, the ProVerif model differs in a few aspects.

*Exclusive-OR and sum.* ProVerif does not support the exclusive-or operator. It does not support addition between variables either<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we had to abstract these two operators to make the analysis possible. We chose to abstract it through a unique uninterpreted function of symbol `xor_combine(·, ·)` that combines two shares into a unique element. We then provide to the attacker some minimal deduction capabilities, common to both exclusive-OR and sum, using the two following reduction rules:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{getL}(\text{xor\_combine}(x, y), y) &= x \\ \text{getR}(\text{xor\_combine}(x, y), x) &= y. \end{aligned}$$

Unfortunately, this modeling does not reflect the algebraic properties of the operators. Going beyond this limitation in ProVerif is still an open problem and out of scope of this paper. Despite this limitation, our analysis provides a substantial level of confidence in the security of the protocol.

*Permutations.* In the protocol, permutations are used to keep the voter’s choice private. Permutations are encountered in other contexts, such as mixnets, but unfortunately, no faithful model exists at the moment for mixnets, they are instead abstracted away in existing analysis (see e.g., [14,4]). Hence we cannot rely on these approaches. In our protocol, we use the fact that permutations are independent from a voter to another. They can therefore be soundly abstracted as follows to prove vote privacy: first, do not apply any permutation for voting material associated to dishonest voters. Then, when forging Alice’s and Bob’s voting material, apply the following permutation: assuming that the permutation  $\sigma$  is applied to the plain votes 0 and 1 on the left side of the equivalence, apply the permutation  $\sigma' = \{0 \mapsto 1, 1 \mapsto 0\} \circ \sigma$  on the right side. If  $\sigma$  is a randomly sampled permutation, then  $\sigma'$  is a randomly sampled permutation too. We can thus soundly apply the first transformation and abstract away the exact permutation  $\sigma$ . It makes ProVerif succeed in proving equivalence in the scenarios we consider.

<sup>1</sup> Since v2.01, ProVerif supports natural numbers. However, the operator  $+$  can only be used between a variable and a constant or two constants, which is too restrictive to model our protocol.

### 4.3 Results

The ProVerif tool confirmed the expected security of the protocol: both privacy and verifiability hold as soon as the setup component and one control component are trusted. The analysis took about 224s for verifiability and about 11s for vote privacy. The corresponding ProVerif files are available as supplementary material. Experiments have been conducted on a standard laptop (MacBook Pro - M2 Pro - 32GB RAM) using the ProVerif development branch `improved_scope_lemma`<sup>2</sup> as requested by the framework used to prove verifiability [13].

## 5 Conclusion

We have provided a simple voting protocol that satisfies both verifiability and privacy, even against a dishonest device. Its simplicity makes it easy to implement, with no scalability issue related to cryptographic computations. Our proposal also demonstrates that the Swiss requirements can be fulfilled with a minimal protocol, providing some conceptual answer on the “minimal” building blocks needed in this setting. It also opens the discussion on which other properties are also needed. For example, we noticed that the SwissPost protocol still guarantees privacy when only the setup component and one auditor are dishonest, and all other components, including the communication channels and the voting server, are honest. This is due to the fact that the voting device encrypts the vote. In contrast, our code-voting protocol does not offer vote privacy against an honest-but-curious setup component that has access to the ballot box. This highlights the fact that the Swiss Chancellery, in charge of defining the required properties, may want to further strengthen its requirements. For example, it may want to require that an honest-but-curious setup component may not, alone, break vote privacy. On the other hand, this will make the design of code voting schemes much more complex. Hence, on the contrary, another desirable requirement could be vote privacy against a voting device.

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